

XENONAUTS

CRIMSON
DAGGER

LEE STEPHEN

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Crimson Dagger

By Lee Stephen

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“The best weapon against an enemy is another enemy.”
— Friedrich Nietzsche

FOOTSTEPS CLOMPING rhythmically, General Vladimir Kulik rounded one of the Kremlin's many ornate halls. Behind him and struggling to keep up was Colonel Alexander Spanov. "Vasilyev," Spanov said. "What about him?"

"Vasilyev would never get there soon enough," said Kulik. "Time is critical."

The hallways were bustling at a frenetic pace. Scribbling something on a piece of paper while he followed the general, Spanov bumped solidly into another passing officer, nearly stumbling. Still, he kept on. "If proximity is a concern, then perhaps Tyannikov *would*—"

"We cannot have a liaison to the Americans who doesn't speak English, colonel. He is where he is for a reason."

"Then perhaps someone from the GRU," Spanov said. When the general didn't answer, he sighed exhaustedly. "There are only so many candidates for an operation like this."

Stopping in the hall, Kulik turned to face Spanov fully. "Who was in charge of the western surge in Hungary?" Spanov cocked his head unknowingly. "The one Zhukov always praised?"

Spanov snapped his finger. "I know who you mean. Gah, what is his name?"

"Kirov."

"*Kirov!*"

Resuming his march, Kulik spoke back to the once-again following colonel. "Where is Kirov now?"

Huffing, Spanov answered, "Germany, general. Zossen-Wünsdorf. But is that close enough?"

"They have a Tu-104." Drawing to a stop outside of a conference room doorway, Kulik locked eyes with Spanov. "Contact Dorokhov. Tell him to move Kirov at once. I want him airborne."

"Yes, general."

"Tell him everything."

Offering a salute, Spanov acknowledged then turned to step away. A moment later, he paused and looked back. "Umm. General, what is everything?"

Jaw setting, Kulik cracked open the conference room door, then looked back. "Everything." Without another word, he disappeared into the chamber. Spanov was left in the hall.

"Everything," Spanov whispered to himself, blowing out a breath of preparation. "Here we go."

1

Wednesday, April 23rd, 1958
1246 hours
Zossen, Germany

HE KNEW SHE hated math. She'd hated it since the first day she'd been handed her first homework assignment. She'd struggled with basic arithmetic—two plus six, eight plus nine. Now that division had been reached, well, she might as well have been attempting linear algebra.

“Look,” he said in the most loving voice a frustrated father could offer, “you have eight apples. If you divide them equally into two, how many apples does each side have?”

Kseniya's brown eyes squinted painfully. The brown-haired six-year-old focused on the worksheet lying on their living room end-table. Her temples almost seemed to throb. Opening her mouth as if on the cusp of an attempt to answer, she managed only a wince.

Running his hand through his hair, Mikhail Kirov rose from his crouched position next to her chair. Setting his hands on his hips, he blew out a breath.

“Can I go play in my room?” asked Kseniya.

“No. You are supposed to be sick today. An obviously exaggerated claim.”

The little girl frowned and looked at the worksheet. “I don't like this, papa.”

“Try,” he said, kneeling down again. “Just try.”

“I don't want to do it.”

Mikhail sighed. “There will always be things you must do that you don't want to do.”

“I want to be a soldier. So I can fight the Americans!”

Closing his eyes and rubbing a hand over his face, Mikhail said, “Kseniya, there are no Americans here.” *And we are not fighting them anyway.* “Why do you always talk about these things? Why can't you be a normal little girl?”

“I want to be like you!”

“When have you ever seen me fighting Americans? Look out of the window. Do you see any Americans here?” Truth be told, he wouldn’t have minded Americans outside of his window. He’d had his fill of Germans south of Berlin. Zossen was the last place on the planet Mikhail wanted to be. The irony was that the Soviet Army considered it a “reward” for his service in the Hungarian Revolution. To be sure, Hungary was worse than Zossen—by a long shot—but neither place was ideal to raise a Russian child.

Of course, there had been some *actual* perks with the transfer, not the least of which was being able to live in a Soviet Army-owned house. Even though most of his time consisted of living on Zossen-Wünsdorf, the base where his unit was garrisoned, having a place to come home to that was truly one’s own was a luxury afforded to very few. There were benefits to impressing Soviet generals, and his command operations in Hungary had left then-General Zhukov impressed. Mikhail excelled at improvising both on the battlefield and in his mind. More than a few lives in both Hungary and Russia had been saved by that quality. His thoughtful yet effective command style had been a breath of fresh air in an otherwise lopsided operation. Or at least Zhukov had thought so. With a house the army was allowing him to live in, Mikhail wasn’t about to complain.

Looking away from the worksheet, Kseniya’s eyes lit up. “We beat the Americans to space!”

“Yes, and we are beating them in mathematics. Do you know how many six-year-olds in America are learning division?”

Frowning, the little girl stared at the paper again.

“And now you understand why this is so important. It is also important because I said it is important, because I am your father. So once again, how many is half of eight apples?”

For several seconds, Kseniya said nothing. She simply stared zombie-eyed at the worksheet. “...three.”

“Four, Kseniya.” She hadn’t even tried. “You have four apples.”

“...but I gave one to you.”

For the first time, something other than frustration struck Mikhail. “Ha!” Even he had to admit—that one was cute. “Way to fight capitalism.”

Mikhail was thirty-three years old, and Kseniya looked nothing like him. She was a hazel-eyed brunette, a total contrast to his blond-haired and blue-eyed appearance. He had flat facial features, hers were decidedly sharp. She could eat two bowls of pelmeni and somehow lose weight, while he had to watch everything that went into his stomach. She was

just like her mother.

Leaning against the kitchen doorway, Lidiya Kirova folded her arms and smiled, watching as the math lesson continued. The smell of borsch and freshly-cooked cod wafted in from the kitchen behind her. Quietly, she cleared her throat.

“Yes, yes,” said Mikhail, waving her away. “We will be finished in a minute.”

“You said that ten minutes ago.”

“That was not ten...” he glanced at the wall clock. Fifteen minutes had passed since Lidiya had last prompted him. He half frowned. “Just one more minute.”

Lidiya’s smile lingered beneath arched brows. “She asked for borsch, Misha. She is sick, she needs to eat.”

“She is sick like I am a donkey.”

“You said it, not me.” Turning around, Lidiya sashayed back into the kitchen.

His focus returning to Kseniya, Mikhail held up eight fingers—four on each hand. “Count how many fingers I have raised on each hand. You can do this.”

“Four,” she said immediately.

“No, I know you know the answer is four. I want you to see *how* it is four. Count the—”

Mikhail’s words were cut off as the screech of tires emerged from outside their living room window. Looking up, Mikhail watched as a pair of officials bolted out from an olive green BMW. It was one of their vehicles from Zossen-Wünsdorf. The officials made a beeline for the Kirovs’ front porch.

“Dear!” Mikhail said, glancing to the kitchen before the pounding came to his door. Eyes wide, Kseniya looked up from her worksheet. Mikhail hurried to the door as Lidiya emerged behind him.

The moment the door was opened, the officer in front snarled. “Why the hell are you not answering your phone?”

Blinking, Mikhail swung to the phone on their kitchen counter. “It never rang! We have been here all day.”

Lidiya hurried to the phone, picking it up. As she placed it to her ear, her expression fell. “It’s dead again.” Mikhail’s eyes rolled.

“You need to come with us, right now,” the officer said.

“Wait—why? What is going on?”

“Get in the car.”

For Mikhail, an interruption like this was unprecedented. That could only mean one thing: something significant had happened. Mikhail stepped backward, his palm opened toward the officers. "I'll tell my wife goodbye, then I'll come." The officers never moved. As Mikhail hurried to his wife, she met him with an expression of panic.

"What is going on?" she asked breathily.

"I don't know. I'll be back as soon as I can. Pack your things, just in case." A kiss was exchanged, then Mikhail trotted to his daughter. He kissed her forehead. "Finish your homework. Papa loves you."

"Kirov!" the officer shouted.

Glaring, Mikhail went for his shoes. "I am coming, damn it!" Giving his family a final glance, he followed the officers back to their vehicle.

At a decent pace in his own Soviet-assigned vehicle, it typically took Mikhail a full twenty minutes to reach Zossen-Wünsdorf. But the rate at which the BMW was moving was anything but decent. Pedestrians leapt out of the street to avoid the vehicle being driven at barreling speeds. His eyes wide and his heart racing, Mikhail gripped his seat as the BMW's momentum threatened to fling him from it at every turn.

"What is going on?" he asked. He flinched as something smashed into the front bumper. A plume of white feathers erupted. They'd just killed a chicken.

The officers said nothing.

"Hey!" Mikhail leaned forward just enough to be slammed back into his seat as they braked for a hairpin turn. "I asked what's going on!"

Ignoring Mikhail's words, the two men muttered emphatically to one another. Something about time zones. Another turn came, then the accelerator was floored. Zossen-Wünsdorf lay ahead.

Mikhail leaned forward again. "You just ripped me from my family midway through my leave. Now tell me what the hell is going on, right now."

The officer in the passenger seat replied without looking. "It will be explained to you en route."

"En route? En route to where?"

"Kirkjubæjarklaustur."

"Kirk-*what*?"

Looking back firmly, the officer answered, "Iceland."

Mikhail's eyes shot wide. "*Iceland*?"

Driving through the open gate, the BMW headed straight for the runway. Ahead of them, the base's sole Tupolev Tu-104 was preparing to

take off. The BMW accelerated toward it. His jaw hanging open, Mikhail fervently tapped the back of the passenger seat. “I’m getting on *that*?”

“Your gear is on board,” the officer said. “They wait only for you. Get on, quickly.”

Momentum struck again as the BWM drew dangerously close to the plane, spinning at the last second to pull up beside a cluster of personnel by the Tu-104’s airstairs. Mikhail didn’t even have time to open the door himself. One of the men outside jerked it open the moment the BMW stopped.

“Captain Kirov!” the man said, yelling over the plane’s engines. “Do you still know good English?”

Mikhail climbed out of the vehicle and instinctively followed the man, who was walking purposefully toward the airstairs. Before Mikhail could answer, a small stack of papers was thrust his way.

“This is to refresh yourself,” the man said, “in case you are out of practice!” As they reached the stairs, the man motioned Kirov to climb. “They will explain everything to you en route! Your gear is already on board. Good luck, captain!”

“Good luck for *what*?” Mikhail’s question went unanswered. Hurrying up the stairs, he ducked to enter the plane. The moment he was inside, the airstairs began to ascend.

The Tu-104 was the king of the sky: a twin-engine turbojet officially classified as a *jetliner*—the first of its kind. While mainly used for Russian civilian transportation, the Soviet military had purchased a respectable number of them for large-scale troop transportation. With speeds of almost a thousand kilometers per hour, it was a tremendous asset to Soviet forces. They were fortunate to have one at Zossen-Wünsdorf.

The cabin was alive with chatter from what appeared to be a mix of officers and soldiers. Mikhail craned his neck to look for an open seat. His name was called before he found one.

“Captain Kirov!”

In a seat far ahead and motioning for Mikhail to approach was Colonel Anton Dorokhov. He was a man Mikhail worked with frequently at the base. Hurrying down the aisle, Mikhail offered the mustached colonel a formal salute.

“Sit down,” Dorokhov said simply. Sliding into an adjacent vacant chair, Mikhail gave Dorokhov his full attention, lowering the papers he’d been handed onto his lap. “Your uniform and gear are by the boxes in the

rear,” Dorokhov said as the jetliner rolled forward. “How much do you know about the situation?”

“Nothing, colonel. I was told it would be explained. Thirty minutes ago, I was teaching my daughter division.” As the plane’s speed increased, Mikhail leaned back in his chair. He had never flown in a Tu-104 before. He felt a slight swell of lightheadedness at the sheer newness of it, though he maintained his composure. “I was told we are en route to Iceland. Did something happen with NATO?”

Dorokhov looked out the window. “There is much to explain and very little time. This is only a three-hour flight.” After a pause, his attention returned to Mikhail. “America launched and detonated several nuclear missiles over the Atlantic.” Mikhail’s eyes widened. “It was not an act of aggression. It was an act of defense. At 0523 hours local time, a squadron of American fighter jets was engaged by an unknown aircraft over the Atlantic coast.”

And this needed nukes? Mikhail listened on as the jetliner lifted.

“From what we understand, the American aircraft were either damaged or destroyed. Nuclear missiles were fired, and the unknown aircraft was shot down north of Kirkjubæjarklaustur.”

At that, Mikhail couldn’t contain himself. “Shot down? Not destroyed?”

Dorokhov’s attention shifted to the window; the jetliner ascended. For a moment, the colonel’s jaw set. “The aircraft in question is believed to be extraterrestrial in origin.”

Mikhail blinked. Was this a joke?

“NATO forces are already on scene,” Dorokhov said. “They have set up a perimeter and are awaiting our arrival to proceed.” He reached for a folder tucked into the armrest of the chair, handing it to Mikhail. Before Mikhail could open the folder, the colonel continued. “I will explain this as simply as I can. You will be assisting the American forces in a conjoined assault on the aircraft. Spacecraft,” he corrected. “The request for cooperation was made by the American president, straight to the Kremlin.”

As Mikhail listened, he flipped through the contents of the folder. Various aerial photographs were inside. He rotated them several ways in an attempt to sort them out.

“These were faxed to us from Tu-16 flyovers. This is the spacecraft, here.” He pointed to a large vessel entrenched in the earth in what looked like a giant mud field. Or a crater. The shadows of elevated outcroppings could be seen strewn across the landscape. Impact debris. “You can look at this cluster of trees to get the scale.”

“Good God...”

“According to Voroshilov, NATO forces have already been engaged and are fighting to hold their ground. Upon our arrival, an offensive push will be attempted.”

Cycling through the photographs, Mikhail stopped at one that was different. It wasn't aerial—it was taken from the ground. It appeared to be looking down upon the vessel from atop a hill. There were no forces, terrestrial or otherwise, anywhere to be seen. “What is this?”

“That is why we were called. Infrared of the buried portion of the craft indicates there may be a hole in its rear. It did not crash forward, but in somewhat of a free-fall, leaving much of the rear buried. At this particular place, it is visible only four meters above the surface.” Crinkling his nose and subsequently his mustache, Dorokhov leaned back in his chair. “The Americans wish to attempt a breach of this potential entryway. They believe there is the chance for a flank attack on the forces inside the vessel, thus strengthening a frontal push. With a small team of your own, you will be working cooperatively with U.S. Special Forces to infiltrate and engage the extraterrestrials.”

Dorokhov went on. “I want to be clear. Our official mission is to assist the Americans in a conjoined operation to capture the extraterrestrial spacecraft. Do you understand?”

“I understand—”

Cutting Mikhail off before he could finish his statement, Dorokhov once again said, “Allow me to repeat myself. Our *official* mission is to assist the Americans in a conjoined operation to capture the extraterrestrial spacecraft.” Turning to look at Mikhail straight on, the colonel asked, “Do you understand, Captain Kirov?”

He did now. Offering a single nod and looking forward, Mikhail said, “I understand, colonel.”

Inhaling deeply, Dorokhov joined Mikhail in staring ahead. Neither man was looking at the other. “Some people cannot be trusted with power. When a big boy gets a big stick, he will use it. History has taught us this. How much sleep do you think Truman lost on August 6th, 1945?”

Mikhail's gaze sunk slowly. A public thanking to God—that was what Truman offered in the wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. An atrocity that left hundreds of thousands dead. Not military personnel or soldiers. Civilians. And they thanked God for it. This was the United States of America. Yes...Mikhail knew exactly what Dorokhov was getting at.

“We do not have the on-site manpower to capture this spacecraft

and its technology alone,” the colonel said, “but the Americans do.” He looked at Mikhail again. “We have been asked to join this operation as a show of good faith by the American government, but do not fool yourself into thinking that that good faith goes very far. We were invited because America cares about its image, not because we are actually wanted. If they *can* lay sole claim to the technology in this spacecraft, rest assured they will.”

“Then how can we stop them?” Mikhail asked. “This is in NATO territory. It’s an American offensive. What forces do we have there to keep them in check?”

Shifting in his chair, Dorokhov answered, “None. That is why your number one priority is to *survive*. You will be entering this vessel with U.S. Special Forces. If something should happen to your team inside the craft—be it at the hands of the aliens *or* the Americans—no one will be left to hold the Americans accountable.” He leaned closer. “A Special Forces strike team can keep a secret, but an army of men cannot. It would be nothing for the strike team to kill you inside the vessel and later claim it was at the hands of the extraterrestrials. But if you survive until the American offensive reaches you, they will not be able to touch you—there would be too many potential witnesses. America cares about its image. To have treachery like that leak out to the world would destroy America’s global reputation.”

“I understand, colonel.”

The colonel nodded and leaned back. “You will meet your Soviet comrades for this joint operation in Kirkjubæjarklaustur. There, you will also receive information on the extraterrestrials—or at least what has been observed from them on the ground. There are some details even I do not know yet.”

Mikhail nodded.

“Now get your gear and read over your papers,” Dorokhov said, motioning to the documents Mikhail had been handed upon boarding the flight—English translations of standard military commands. “We land at thirteen hundred.”

The hours passed as fleetingly as the clouds outside Mikhail’s window, with plenty to keep Mikhail’s mind racing the whole while. Aliens. Capitalists. The only thing worse than either of those was both of them together.

This was an event the likes of which he’d never fathomed. His morning

with Kseniya seemed like another day entirely, and now he fully understood why his leave had been unceremoniously interrupted. This warranted interruption. This was serious. As was always the case in the midst of wartime activity, it was all too easy to block out the personal side of his life in favor of the military one. This was the here and now, and here and now, nothing else mattered.

Turning to a photograph of the spaceship, Mikhail examined it more closely. The ship was ray-like in design, with a large, circular central saucer flanked by two massive wings—almost like arms. It was hard to make out any distinguishing characteristics such as openings, hardpoints, or possible weapons, though he wasn't positive those would be visible anyway. He was sure that damage from the nuke and the impact was obscuring the photograph, too.

“So the Americans want to enter here,” he murmured to himself, fixating on the rear of the vessel. “Maybe that was where the warhead hit?”

That this ship had survived a nuclear strike was unbelievable. What kind of material was this thing made from? Metal? Something else? *Something light enough to fly, but strong enough to survive a nuclear attack.* He slid his fingers into his hairline and rested his forehead against his palm. *How deep will they have to dig to reach this entryway? Meters? Or is it just below the surface?* Even without fine detail, it was apparent that the ship was partially buried. He just didn't know what that constituted in relation to the dig site.

The thought of cooperating with Americans was as new to Mikhail as the aliens themselves. The United States may have been touting cooperation, but as Dorokhov indicated, there was always an ulterior motive when dealing with Yankees. The very nature of capitalism was rooted in insatiableness. The Americans would not be eager to share alien technology. But they would be eager to use it. On the Soviet Union. On Japan. On Europe and the Middle East. On anyone they could justify a necessity to surpass.

The extraterrestrials fired first—they are obviously here to harm us. But I trust them far more than I trust Americans. At least the aliens are honest about their intentions.

U.S. Special Forces. Some of America's most ruthless killers. At some point during this joint operation, if things were going as planned and the alien vessel was being successfully breached, those Special Forces would turn their guns on Mikhail and his comrades the moment Soviets were no longer needed. That was what Americans did.

I need to be ready for that.

He turned to the next page in the stack—the first page he hadn't yet seen. It was a list of names. Soviet soldiers. Mikhail's brow furrowed as he made the realization: these were going to be his comrades. He wondered if any of them were on board the plane.

Six names. I make seven.

Mikhail focused on the topmost name. Senior Lieutenant Sevastian Tyannikov. His XO. For some reason, Tyannikov's last name felt familiar. Maybe they'd served together before. Two lieutenants were listed next, Iosif Mednikov and Valentin Rubashkin. Mikhail had never heard of them. Onto the next. Sergeants Yuri Vikhrov and Nikolai Lukin, an engineer and a medic, respectively. An unconventional, though understandable assortment considering the situation. He looked at the final name. Nina Andrianova.

Mikhail blinked, his hands going rigid. "Nina *Andrianova*?" He blurted the words aloud, though no one nearby seemed to notice. "What?" he whispered as he stared at the name. Slowly, he lowered the paper and looked ahead.

Mikhail had never met Nina Andrianova. He didn't even know what she looked like. But he knew her name. Everyone in the Soviet Army did.

Nina was a legend among snipers, having served in a multitude of operations dating back to World War II. Finland. Eastern Europe. Manchuria. She'd even been present for the Hungarian Revolution. Legend stated obligatorily that she was beautiful. It also stated that she'd sent five hundred men to their graves. Both claims were likely exaggerated. Just the same, the fact that she was a part of his team stated something clearly: this was a take-no-chances operation.

As Mikhail suspected, the pages that followed contained a full dossier for every member of his team. With time to spare, he pored over their contents.

Sevastian, his XO, had also served in Hungary—undoubtedly the reason Mikhail recognized his name—albeit in a different district. The remarks left by his superiors were strikingly similar to the ones Mikhail's superiors had always attributed to him, minus the ability to speak English. All in all, Sevastian had the look of an ideal executive officer.

The first of his two lieutenants, Iosif, seemed nothing short of brutal. After serving as military aid in North Korea, he had been sent to Estonia to supervise fortification efforts against the Baltic states. Apparently, Iosif had been a captain in North Korea. The demotion came shortly after

his tenure there ended. Phrases like *overly aggressive* and *needs strict guidelines* stood out like sore thumbs. That was probably why he'd been sent to Estonia. There was much less to do there. It was a relatively safe place for a hothead to be.

His other lieutenant, Valentin, also fought against the Baltic states, though in Lithuania. His comments were considerably less alarming, consisting of words like *integrity*, *dedication*, and *resourceful*. From the looks of it, Valentin's superiors had tried him briefly as a senior lieutenant, only to realize that he had no leadership instinct. He was a follower. But a great one.

As for Yuri and Nikolai, his engineer and medic, both had been serving in Berlin for some time and held above-average marks across the board, most notably in their chosen fields. Nothing stood out as extraordinary, but nothing was required to. As long as they could function decently, Mikhail would be pleased. By the look of their records, they could.

Placing the stack of papers down, Mikhail allowed his gaze to wander to the window. The clouds were still gliding past, their ethereal wisps a serene contrast to the reality he was about to face. Extraterrestrials were on Earth. That fact seemed too surreal to be true. It surely hadn't registered with him yet. Perhaps a part of him refused to believe it until he saw it, not in a photograph, but with his own eyes. He was about to get that chance.

For the remainder of the flight, Mikhail tried his best to prepare for a situation that couldn't be prepared for. He strategized on hypotheticals and rehashed past assignments. He imagined what his team would do if they'd find themselves flanked or lost in an alien spaceship. It was all purely speculative, but nonetheless fruitful. It got his mind where it needed to be.

No mission he'd ever been on had required that more.

2

1327 hours (local time) Kirkjubæjarklaustur, Iceland

TWO SENSATIONS HIT Mikhail as the Tu-104's door opened: fridity and moisture. Gray clouds had appeared the moment they'd crossed onto Southern Iceland, stretching as far as the eye could see. Though the rain was far from torrential, combined with the incessant whipping of the wind, it created a soak-storm of drizzle and mist that blasted Mikhail's uniform with every step he took. His helmet did little to shield his face from the rain. Russia was cold; he was used to that. But this was just miserable.

Slinging the AK-47 that'd been with his gear over his shoulder, Mikhail looked across the landscape as he descended the airstairs. He searched for any sign of the alien vessel, but saw nothing. He had hoped to catch a glimpse of it from the sky, but their angle of approach had brought them down before they reached the spacecraft's location. Reaching the bottom step, he made a small leap to the concrete strip below.

Kirkjubæjarklaustur's base, if it even deserved that designation, was minuscule. Beyond a couple of small hangars and a building or two, it seemed to consist mostly of runways, almost all of which were jammed with aircraft. There were another two TU-104s on site, though most of the planes and vehicles there seemed to be NATO. American soldiers were everywhere, and a dreadful sensation swelled inside Mikhail. This felt wrong.

Scanning the runway, his eyes came upon a Soviet officer holding a cardboard sign, Mikhail's name scribbled upon it. Trotting to the man, he raised his hand in salute. "I am Kirov." The officer promptly returned the formality. "Colonel Dorokhov was with me. Do we need to wait for him?" Glancing behind, Mikhail searched for the mustached colonel somewhere in the crowd. He was nowhere to be seen.

Shaking his head, the officer said, "No. I am to escort you immediately to your assignment at NATO's command center."

"Where is the rest of my team?" He waved around the dossiers.

The officer was already walking to a nearby NATO vehicle, a drab green covered jeep with two Americans sitting in the front seats. “Your team is already by the command center. They arrived shortly before you did.”

Removing his AK-47 from over his shoulder, Mikhail climbed into the back seat and propped the weapon upright. His focus then went to the Americans. Both men looked at each other in a way that was as conspicuous as it was blatantly unsubtle—a Yankee specialty.

Glancing over his shoulder, the driver asked, “Y’all strapped in?”

“Da,” the Russian officer said.

Giving the officer a sidelong look, Mikhail answered with a more appropriate, “Yes.”

In a voice laden with forced camaraderie, the driver said, “Hold on.” Mikhail shifted in his seat, and the jeep rolled forward.

The drive lasted all of ten minutes, every moment of which Mikhail spent studying the NATO vehicles and personnel they passed. He gripped his rifle tighter as his eyes wandered from one sight to the next. NATO flags. Patton tanks. Soldiers with M1 rifles.

This morning I wished for Americans outside my window, just for a change. I wonder if I can take that back.

Neither driver said a word as the jeep rolled on. At long last, as it approached what seemed to be the far side of the command center, it pulled into a gravel parking area. The ignition was turned off and the American in the passenger seat climbed out.

“This is where you get out,” the Russian officer next to Mikhail said, pointing to cluster of men several tents down. “That is your team.” Mikhail’s gaze followed the officer’s indication until he found the grouping of Soviet soldiers—a sight he more than welcomed. “Good luck, captain.” A half-hearted salute was exchanged, and Mikhail exited the covered jeep back into the rain. Shouldering his rifle again, he approached his men.

The men pivoted to face him as soon as they saw him. “Captain on scene!” the rightmost man said. Each one fell into a salute. Mikhail returned it, then surveyed the soldiers. Five were present. Where was Nina?

The same man who’d announced Mikhail’s arrival spoke again. “I am Senior Lieutenant Sevastian Tyannikov, captain. I am ready to assist you in whatever you need.”

“Thank you, lieutenant.” He scrutinized his XO. Clean-cut brown hair, sharp facial features. A focused expression. Sevastian looked like a professional. “Where is Andrianova?”

Sevastian looked at him oddly. “Andrianova, captain?”

“Nina Andrianova. She is supposed to be here.”

At the mention of the sniper’s name, Sevastian’s eyes widened. The other men bore similar reactions. “Nina Andrianova is here?” he asked. “Going in with *us*?”

Mikhail turned around, scanning the surrounding area. There was no sign of Nina, nor of any other Soviets. Could her inclusion have been an error? Facing his team, he waved off the murmurs. “I do not know.” He scrutinized them again. As a whole, they looked as uncomfortable as he did. As individuals, they looked like an elite unit should. Iosif Mednikov, his supposedly ultra-aggressive lieutenant, was a hulk of a man. Sporting curly black hair and a neatly-trimmed beard, he looked more than capable of holding his own. Firm in his grasp was a PPSH-41 submachine gun.

In contrast, Valentin Rubashkin, his other lieutenant, was slender and solemn. No hair was visible under his helmet, leading Mikhail to figure that the man was either bald or shaven. Whereas Iosif looked rough, Valentin’s keen gaze conveyed perspicacity. He looked like a thinker. Just the same, both men sported the same weapon. Close-quarters specialists.

Nikolai Lukin was a smaller-framed man, though he appeared decently cut, particularly for a medic. The same could be said for their engineer, Yuri Vikhrov. All-in-all, the crew looked quite capable.

“All right, listen,” Mikhail said, taking a position front and center before them. “I am Mikhail Kirov, your captain, as Lieutenant Tyannikov has pointed out. I am sure you must have many questions, as I do myself. I assure you, everything that is relayed to me will be relayed to you. No one can be left in the dark for an operation as challenging as this.”

Though the men stayed at attention before him, their eyes shifted about noticeably. From a crew of such high pedigree, it struck Mikhail as oddly uncertain. And so he paused. “You do know what this operation is about, correct?” For the first time, the men broke their attentive stances, looking at one another blankly. Sevastian finally broke the silence.

“We assumed it was in response to the nuclear incident, captain, but none of us were told specifics—only that we would be working alongside American forces. None of us were told why.”

They don’t even know. How in the world was he going to explain this? Aliens were attacking? Spaceships were crashing to Earth? Would they think this was a joke? Mikhail opened his mouth to begin as best he could, but before he could say anything, an American officer stepped out from a nearby tent and addressed him.

“Captain Kirov! You Captain Kirov?”

Mikhail faced the man. “Yes—”

“The general’s ready to begin. We need you in the tent now.”

“Wait,” said Mikhail, holding his palm out. “I need to speak with my team first.”

The American shook his head. “We don’t have time for that. Do it later.”

Later? This mission wasn’t exactly one that could be thrust upon someone without time to prepare. Not for something as surreal as this. “If I were not Soviet, would you give me time then?” The man said nothing. “If I cannot address them here, then you will allow them to accompany me into your tent. You make the choice.”

Mikhail could tell by the look on the man’s face that he’d offered an unpalatable ultimatum. Prompting Mikhail to wait, the man disappeared back into the tent, leaving the Soviets waiting in the blustery rain. Moments later, the American appeared again. “Bring them in.”

“Thank you, *comrade*.” Mikhail’s emphasis was intentional. And less than well-meant. His expression darkening, the American held the tent open for Mikhail’s team to enter.

The tent was packed. From one end to the next, American soldiers and officers lorded over an assortment of equipment ranging from weapons racks to radio stations. Chatter came from every direction—until Mikhail and his men were inside. The Americans looked up from their stations and all sound stopped.

The Soviet Union and the United States of America. Communism versus capitalism. Progress versus prosperity. Never before had those differences felt so tangible. In the midst of the deafening silence that surrounded Mikhail and his men, an unsettling chill rose from the floorboards. For the Soviets, this was enemy territory. For the Americans, this was inviting the enemy in. Never before had a situation felt so conflicting. It was enough to make Mikhail miss Hungary.

Finally, after ten full seconds of tension, someone across the room spoke. “Somebody get those boys some chairs. And some coffee, pronto.” Following the voice, Mikhail’s stare came to rest on a man across the room. He seemed older than most of the others present, maybe in his fifties. Pushing his glasses up against his nose, he motioned for the Soviets to approach. “Have a seat over here, gentlemen.”

Stepping through the crowded tent, Mikhail and his men made their way over. Maps and photographs were posted everywhere. The

extraterrestrial spacecraft was plainly visible in each one. Mikhail spared a quick glance behind him to see if his team had taken notice. Based on their looks of wide-eyed perplexity, they had.

“Hope you like your coffee black,” the man said, stepping closer to meet Mikhail’s approach. “General Thomas Palmerston, NATO command. Pleasure to meet you.” He extended his hand, a gesture Mikhail accepted.

“Captain Mikhail Kirov, Soviet Fourth Army. My...team.” He realized in that moment that he didn’t even know their names well enough to recite off the cuff.

Palmerston seemed sympathetic. “Long day and it hasn’t even begun, I know. Your team paratroop in?”

“Paratroop? No.”

“Mm.” The general nodded and motioned for the Soviets to follow. “Thought you might have come in with the first batch.” As they approached the newly-formed row of chairs set up for the foreign arrivals, Palmerston pointed to a small group of men standing along the tent wall. Dark green uniforms, M3 submachine guns. But it was their hats that gave them away.

Green Berets.

Palmerston beckoned the nearest Green Beret toward them. He was a man with an unwavering gaze—intensity personified, with brown hair and green eyes. The general stepped aside to allow the man to greet Mikhail. “Kirov, I’d like you to meet Captain Charles Hemingway, 10th Special Forces Group. He and his team will be accompanying you inside the spacecraft.”

“*Spacecraft?*” Sevastian blurted out behind them, apparently recognizing that particular English word. The rest of Mikhail’s team looked equally stunned.

Hemingway’s eyes narrowed as he looked at Sevastian briefly, then back to Mikhail. “They don’t know?” he asked, his voice deep, yet crisp.

“They have been told nothing,” Mikhail answered. “I was hoping to explain the situation when I got called in here.”

“Well, let’s get these boys an explanation,” Palmerston said, walking toward the largest photograph. The Soviets took their seats as the general proceeded to explain the situation.

Every detail that Mikhail had heard from Dorokhov on the jetliner was covered again, from the initial nuclear strike to the arrival of military personnel on the scene to secure the perimeter. It wasn’t until Palmerston got specifically to their assignment—the infiltration of the craft via rear, buried hull breach—that things took a turn for the different.

“Washington and the Kremlin made it very clear that this is a joint operation. I know we’ve had our differences, but now’s not the time to focus on them. For the sake of this operation, we can’t afford to.”

As the general spoke on, Mikhail translated quietly for his Russian comrades.

“This operation, which we’re calling *Crimson Dagger*,” Palmerston said, “falls under our special access programs for operations and support. That’s top secret, for you red boys. Officially, you’re here to borrow some trucks for civilian crowd control. If any word of this operation leaves this tent, both sides will deny everything—and of course, you’ll deal with your government. I’m sure that’s not something you want to do.”

In that, Palmerston was right. Mikhail glanced briefly to his comrades, who were taking in the translated information as best they could, glassy looks showing on their faces. His focus returned to the general.

Casting a brief look to Hemingway before going on, Palmerston paced across the front of the sectioned area. “Now, you boys extended us a favor by not jumping the gun when we set off those nukes. It’s for that reason we’re extending our trust to you. Kirov, you will be serving as commanding officer for this entire operation, yours and ours alike.”

Mikhail raised an eyebrow.

“Captain Hemingway will assume the role of executive officer. Should something happen to you, he and his men will assume command of the entire operation. But *you’re* the crimson in this.”

So the chain of command began with Mikhail but continued only with Americans. He was just a Soviet figurehead for a Yankee operation. This reeked of ill intent, just as Dorokhov had suspected. He had no doubt that one of the Green Berets’ bullets was meant for him—a friendly-fire “accident” waiting to happen. Once Mikhail went down, the Americans would be in charge. He had to survive at all costs. For Russia and the world.

“At this very moment,” Palmerston said, “a special reconnaissance team is excavating the ground by the breach. One of your own snipers is providing cover fire.”

Andrianova. That must have been where she went. “Is she providing cover by herself?”

Palmerston nodded. “Yes, she is.”

Nina was confirmed.

“The bulk of our defense effort is facing the forward section of the alien vessel.” Walking toward Hemingway, the general went on. “The dig team consists of three. Your sniper makes four. With the six of you and

six of our boys going in, we've got a nice, clean dozen. We send in any more and we risk getting overcrowded."

So Nina wasn't even going in. It made sense from a tactical standpoint. The fight inside the ship would be close quarters. Not exactly ideal for a sniper.

Palmerston's expression shifted, his comfortable tone being replaced with something more uncertain. "Now let's talk about the enemy." Every Soviet sat upright. The Americans seemed less affected—they'd probably heard this before.

"Our ground forces didn't start testing the lines until Soviet reinforcements arrived. But here's what we know so far. The aliens themselves appear to be reptilian. They're also big. Six feet tall, some as high as seven feet, and bulky to boot. We haven't gotten close enough to see how they communicate or coordinate, but beyond using basic cover fire around the ship's entrance, they don't seem to be operating with any advanced strategic maneuvers." He pointed to one of the photographs depicting rock formations just in front of the spacecraft. "These stones right here are providing the bulk of their cover. We haven't pressed forward much, but in the little we have, the aliens have used those stones to their advantage."

So the aliens hadn't actually moved in on the Americans. There was no obvious offensive in progress. Crossing his arms, Mikhail leaned back as he listened. This should have been an easy operation. Air strike the ship's perimeter. The aliens were already grounded—blow them away. Why wasn't NATO doing that? *Because if they destroy this ship, they can't harness its technology. They need to take it from the ground.*

Palmerston frowned. "Now's the part you need to focus on. Reuben, play that film reel." As the general stepped aside, a nearby officer rolled out a projector. After a moment of setup, he directed it at a standing screen. The grainy film began.

"This is an offensive we attempted shortly after the area was initially secured. Just intended to test their defenses and get a better idea of their capabilities."

Leaning forward, Mikhail watched the film. He recognized the front view of the fallen spacecraft. NATO forces were moving in. No Soviet soldiers could be seen anywhere. *So they didn't wait for us to arrive after all.* All of a sudden, a flurry of bright flashes emerged from the rock formation. Mikhail's crew collectively gasped as several NATO soldiers were struck. It was like watching men struck by lightning. Bright blue

energy erupted with every hit on human targets. The soldiers were being fried alive.

Hand covering his mouth, Mikhail was transfixed on the scenes of carnage unfolding on the screen. Several more NATO soldiers were struck. The fallback began. Flashes of energy zipped past the camera. The retreat was in full swing. Then the film froze—an image of a man caught mid-blast lingering in the final still.

Silence.

For what felt like a minute but had to be much less, no one spoke a word. The Americans were letting what the Soviets had just seen sink in.

Mikhail had been in numerous campaigns. He knew how to survive. But nothing he'd been through compared to what he'd just witnessed. His blue eyes stayed locked on the soldier in the film—a faceless man meeting a horrible death the likes of which Mikhail had never seen before. A knot formed deep in his stomach.

Palmerston's reverence for the moment lingered for several more seconds, before he inhaled slowly and took front and center again. "And that, gentlemen, is what you're about to encounter."

Mikhail's mind was racing through tactics. *Guerilla-style warfare. A lot of hitting and running, a lot of flanking. Counter the aliens with speed. If we can.*

The general continued on solemnly. "The element of surprise is our only advantage. Obviously, their technology is superior, in the air and on the ground."

Hand-to-hand is out of the question. We wouldn't get close enough. We wouldn't win even if we could—not against creatures seven feet tall.

"If you can make the aliens turn to focus on you, we can move in from the front. We can hit them from both sides, so long as the diversion is there."

How can we win this? Rubbing his temple, Mikhail racked his brain for an answer.

Palmerston stepped aside. "You now know everything that we do. I know you have a lot of concerns. I know you have a lot of questions. But frankly, there isn't enough time. You're here because you're some of the Soviet Army's best. Our boys are some of the best, too. There's no doubt you'll succeed." With nothing else to present, Palmerston motioned for them as he stepped away. "Come this way and I'll take you to the jeeps."

The whipping winds showed no sign of slowing down; the rain

continued to blast the landscape in horizontal sheets. Somewhere out there, an American dig team covered by a Soviet sniper was clearing out a path into a spacecraft from another world. Climbing into the jeep and soaked to the bone, Mikhail looked down at his AK-47. Compared to the strange weapons of the extraterrestrials, it looked clumsy and primitive. But in the hands of the right humans—the right killers—it would take a life just like anything else.

This is not a suicide mission.

Hungary was dense urban combat. Getting shot at from every angle in its worst moments, being tactically superior in its best. That's what this would boil down to: intelligence. Not the kind of intelligence that could build spaceships and fire energy weapons, but the kind that was aware of its toe-to-toe inferiority. The kind that knew there were other ways to win. Like digging a hole to enter a breach.

Crimson Dagger, indeed.

Splashing through the gravel and mud, the small convoy of jeeps began their journey to the crash site, the NATO tents disappearing in the distance behind them. What waited ahead was an unknown enemy. But that was fine.

The enemy didn't know humanity, either.

3

1439 hours

HE'D SEEN THE photographs. He'd heard the description of the site and examined the map of the Americans' entry plan. But nothing could have prepared Mikhail for actually witnessing the scene firsthand.

The spacecraft was huge. Its wingspan looked easily half a kilometer long. Even with the vessel embedded in the ground as a result of the crash, the amount that was exposed was enough to make this the most titanic ship the Russian captain had ever seen. How this thing could rise off the ground at all—let alone dogfight with American fighter jets—was not only a mystery, but a testament to the level at which extraterrestrial technology dwarfed that of humanity.

The convoy of jeeps had taken a path east of the spacecraft, around the rear of a series of hills between which they could see the vessel's full breadth. Mud sloshing beneath the jeeps' tires, Mikhail couldn't help but feel a twinge of relief that the battle he was about to face was indoors. The rain had intensified to the point where long-range visibility was heavily obscured, if not completely impossible. Were they not as close to the spacecraft as they were—a frightening fact itself—it might not have been visible at all, despite its size. What once had been rumbling rolls of thunder were now ground-shaking explosions from heaven.

Sitting next to Mikhail was Sevastian, his senior lieutenant, though rank hardly mattered in a mission as unorthodox as this. Shaking his head, Sevastian whispered what sounded like a prayer of some sort—or an exclamation of bad luck. Mikhail couldn't quite tell. No one else from their team was present in that jeep, the convoy's frontrunner.

Facing his senior lieutenant, Mikhail spoke. "Keep your focus on the extraterrestrials, but pay attention to the Americans, too." His voice remained intentionally low. He didn't want the American driver overhearing. As Sevastian arched a brow, Mikhail went on. "There is concern among the higher ranks that the Americans will attempt to eliminate us inside the vessel. This would leave no one behind to hold

them accountable for sharing its wealth.”

Sevastian’s eyes shifted briefly to the driver, then returned to Mikhail. He stayed silent.

“What did the United States do with nuclear technology after they developed it?” Mikhail asked under his breath.

That got a reaction. Inhaling purposefully, Sevastian looked past Mikhail, to the hills behind him. Despite the break of eye contact, the senior lieutenant’s tone was unmistakably keyed in. “I understand, captain.”

“It will be up to you to pass that message on to the rest of our comrades. All eyes will be on me once we are inside the ship.”

Sevastian nodded.

Mikhail looked forward. “Hungary was both complicated and brutal. Even still, I never lost a single man.” In truth, he’d lost seven. It was still an impressive number. But his comrades didn’t need to feel impressed. They needed to feel invincible.

“We will take this vessel, captain,” Sevastian said. He looked at Mikhail dead on. “And if need be, we will take the Americans, too.”

Mikhail nodded his head. There was no need to say anything else. Gazes forward, the two men watched the muddy trail wind on.

The drive to their drop-off point lasted almost thirty minutes, due both to distance and terrain. The hills were muddy and wet, and on more than one occasion, progress had to be slowed to almost a crawl in order to proceed. Throughout the journey, Mikhail surveyed the surrounding area in the slim chance he’d catch sight of something—the spacecraft appearing between dips in the hills, stray shots of that strange energy weapon the aliens were using, anything. As they approached the drop-off point, he finally got his wish. Just not in the way he’d expected.

Coming to a stop at the bottom of a low-lying hill, Mikhail caught sight of a solitary person standing roadside in the monsoon. Her figure, then her weapon, gave her away. Nina. Beauty may have been subjective, but size was not. This woman was tiny.

She approached him as soon as he stepped from the vehicle. Within two seconds of being outside the jeep, Mikhail was drenched. Nina already looked like a drowned rat. Soaked tips of black hair dangled from beneath her helmet. But if the elements were bothering her, she wasn’t letting it show.

“Nina Andrianova, captain.” Slings her sniper rifle from her

shoulder, she said, "I apologize for not being at my post."

It was not the first omission of Nina's rank that Mikhail had encountered. It hadn't been included in the dossiers, either, nor was it present on her uniform. He had a hunch as to why: she likely outranked him. She was probably under his command only due to the strangeness of the operation.

"Covering the dig team became impossible as the rain increased," Nina went on. "The entire enemy force could have mustered at the bottom of the hill and I wouldn't have known." Andrianova's fervid intensity was clear through the downpour.

Mikhail crossed his arms. If visibility was that poor down the hill, he was going to have difficulty finding the dig team at all. He couldn't afford to wander around looking for them, not on this mission and not in this weather. By the look of it, Nina was already thinking what he was.

"The dig team should nearly be finished by now. Should you desire, I can lead you to their position."

"That would be appreciated," Mikhail said. "As soon as we reach the entryway, return to the convoy with the dig team to be extracted."

"Yes, captain."

"Everyone," Mikhail said, "come together!" He waited as the Russians and Americans gathered around him. "We all know what is at stake. The Soviet Army is filled with professionals. So are the Green Berets." Everyone seemed to be listening. Hemingway in particular. "I have been selected to lead this operation, but that does not mean it will be Soviet-first. We all must work as one in order to succeed."

Hemingway nodded. "I want to echo Captain Kirov's words. This is our operation—all of us. We're committed to working with you," he said, looking at Mikhail directly. "As we know you are with us."

The words sounded sincere. Time would tell. "All right," said Mikhail, retaking the floor. "Miss Andrianova will lead us to the dig team. Once we have found them, we will enter the spacecraft. Prepare yourselves, everyone. This mission starts now."

A chorus of acknowledgments were given to him. Readying his AK-47, he turned to Nina. "Take us to the site, Miss Andrianova."

Nina complied, and the journey began.

The route beneath Mikhail and his team had become treacherous. Rain had collected on the ground at the bottom of the hill; every step they took was waterlogged and cold. Ahead, the faint outline of the alien spacecraft

could be made out through the thunderstorm, illuminated occasionally by flashes of lightning. Large earthen outcroppings lay strewn about the field. As Mikhail had suspected, they seemed to be chunks of debris from the spaceship's impact. While most were relatively minor, several were the size of boulders. The reptiles could have easily been hiding behind them. Just another thing to be aware of.

Glancing back briefly, Mikhail caught sight of Sevastian. His senior lieutenant was walking alongside the rest of the Russians. Sevastian looked like he was addressing them, albeit casually. *He must be telling them about the potential for treachery.* The Americans were a good ways behind, save Hemingway, who was only several steps behind Mikhail. The American's eyes were forward, wincing intermittently as rain battered his face. Gaze returning forward, Mikhail kept pace with Nina.

The water would undoubtedly affect the accuracy of their weapons. At the same time, it served as additional cover for their approach. It was a double-edged sword he would have gladly done without. Picking up his speed, he came to within a few paces of Nina. "Miss Andrianova," he said.

Looking back, she made brief eye contact with him before turning ahead. "Yes, captain?"

"What is your rank?"

For several moments, she didn't answer. When she finally did, her voice was distant. "I am a specialist, Mr. Kirov. Rank does not apply to me as it does to you." Several steps later, she spoke again. "But if you must know, I am a major."

She was his direct superior.

Looking back at him again, her stern eyes showed a glint of compassion. "This is your operation, captain. I am here to serve a purpose—you are here to lead. There is no need to address me as your superior. It will be better for your men if you don't."

He hadn't intended to address her rank at all, but the sentiment was appreciated. Regardless, it would all be moot once he entered the spacecraft. "I want you covering the dig site once we are inside, even if it means from behind one of these outcroppings. I don't want us getting flanked."

"Understood, captain."

Looking forward, Mikhail watched as the spacecraft loomed closer. There was no doubt that the rain was affecting the front line. He'd been given some radio equipment during the jeep ride, but for the moment was trusting his American counterparts, one of whom was a communications specialist, to keep the lines of communication open with the rest of their

forces.

“We are coming to the site,” said Nina, slowing her pace as they neared the side of the ship. Mikhail’s eyes followed the outline of the spacecraft. This was behind one of its giant ray-like wings. Once again, he surveyed their immediate surroundings. There were three large outcroppings in their immediate vicinity—perfect cover for an alien ambush. He motioned for Hemingway’s men to spread out.

Nina drew to a stop, holding up her hand to indicate for the others to do the same. Mikhail complied, glancing back only to ensure that the rest of the group did as well. Once confirmed, he turned his focus back to Nina. She was just standing there, hand in the halt position, panning her head ever so slightly to survey the area. But other than that, she was totally still. And totally silent.

Something was wrong.

“Miss Andrianova?” he asked.

“*Shhh!*”

Mikhail froze. Nina’s gaze was locked onto something directly ahead of them, where the side of the spacecraft was now plainly in view. But there was nothing else of significance there that would have caught her eye. No hostiles. No motion.

No dig team.

A chill rolled down Mikhail’s spine. Nina’s pace had been confident—surely this was where they were supposed to be. Squinting through the rain, he could make out the outline of a crude hole dug against the side of the ship. This was where they were supposed to go. Taking a quiet step closer, he whispered to her, “Could they have passed us back to the—“

“No,” she answered. “They were supposed to hold position.” The sniper readied her pistol. She began to move with steady caution toward the spaceship. “We need to see if they finished the dig. We need to see if the entryway is clear.”

Mikhail motioned for Sevastian and Iosif to follow her. “Help her dig if it needs to be dug.”

“Where is the dig team?” Sevastian asked.

“Assume them dead.” Looking back to Hemingway, Mikhail gave the signal for *ambush*. Hemingway relayed the signal to the rest of his troops. They readied their weapons.

Mikhail followed Nina to the wall of the spacecraft, his eyes averting to the hole. It wasn’t finished. It didn’t even look close. Sandbags were strewn about the edge of the hole, at the bottom of which was a pool of

mud. Pulling off her helmet, Nina closed her eyes and exhaled. Hand pressing back her hair, she looked at Mikhail. Her expression conveyed more than words could. This was bad.

“Contact! Contact!”

The voice belonged to Hemingway. Whipping their heads in his direction, Mikhail and Nina raised their weapons to look for a target. But nothing was there, despite the fact that all of the other operatives—Soviet and American alike—were reacting to something. At the same time, Mikhail and Nina swung back around. Their gazes tilted up the side of the spacecraft’s wall.

The aliens were on the roof.

Poised at the ship’s edge was a creature the likes of which Mikhail had never imagined—at least, not at this close a range. It was huge; a reptilian juggernaut covered in green scales and black body armor. And it was aiming at *them*.

Shoving Nina toward the hole, Mikhail leapt in the opposite direction. The energy blast struck where he’d stood a half-second before; a shockwave of heat slammed into Mikhail’s back. But the next thing to hit the ground was worse. From their position atop the vessel—a good five meters from the ground—a trio of extraterrestrials leapt to the earth. One of them landed right by Mikhail.

They looked like warrior lizards. Fiery orange frills stuck up atop their heads; their eyes swiveled like a chameleon’s. Their weapons—bright red rifles like nothing Mikhail had ever seen—searched for their targets. Mikhail was one of them. Rolling as fast as he could, he narrowly avoided an energy blast from the nearest alien’s rifle. Swinging up his AK-47, he opened fire. The creature roared and surged forward.

Assault rifle in hand, Mikhail leapt straight for the hole, which was by far the closest cover to him. Rolling over the edge, his feet escaped him and he tumbled downward, landing on his backside against one of the earthen walls.

Nina was there, too, sloshing through the mud and looking around frantically. Slicking back her hair with both hands, the sniper locked onto Mikhail. “They were much farther along than this!” As she spoke, Nikolai the medic joined them in the pit. “These sandbags were thrown in from above. The aliens must have attacked when the rain became blinding. This mud—it was not like this before. The entire rim of the dig site must have caved!”

“If there were more sandbags, then where are they?” Mikhail asked.

Above them, the blue shine of energy bolts whizzed overhead. “Could they be at the bottom here?”

Seeming to think for a moment, Nina nodded her head. “They had more than enough sandbags to plug up this hole.”

That was all Mikhail needed to hear. Throwing off his helmet and holding his breath, he dove beneath the surface. The mud was watery but thick, and more than a chore to maneuver through. Blindly feeling ahead of him, his fingers came upon something at the bottom of the pool. It was hard—leathery. A sandbag. Grabbing it with both hands, he pushed up with his knees and broke the surface, slinging the mud-soaked bag blindly to the side. Wiping mud from his face, he looked at Nina and Nikolai.

“The bags are down there. If we move them, we find the entryway.” This could be done. “I want you both pulling up bags.” He looked back at the rim of the hole. “I need to get back up there.” A full-on firefight was taking place, and right now he wasn’t a part of it. That needed to change. Glancing at Nina, Mikhail said, “Get up as many as you can.”

“Yes, captain,” she said, wiping her hair back again, then staring at the mud pool. Giving Nikolai a brief look, she sucked in a breath and plunged down. The medic joined her as Mikhail clawed his way out of the pit.

On the surface, the battle raged on—and casualties were mounting. Despite being vastly outnumbered, the reptilian aliens were holding their own. Of the three aliens that had leapt down, two had survived the barrage of ammunition hurled at them. Valentine and Yuri, Mikhail’s lieutenant and his engineer, had fallen, their charred bodies sprawled lifelessly on the ground where the alien weapons had incinerated them. Sevastian was left alone to fight alongside the Green Berets, though casualties were mounting for them, as well. The reptiles were winning.

Mikhail made a beeline for the nearest of the three large outcroppings, where Iosif was firing at one of the reptiles from behind—a specimen contesting Sevastian and a pair of Green Berets. Sliding to a knee and propping his rifle, Mikhail joined in Iosif’s assault. With the two Soviets concentrating on the chinks in the alien’s armor from behind, and with Sevastian and the Americans attacking from the front, the giant reptile was felled in a matter of seconds. Rising to his feet, Mikhail rushed to meet his senior lieutenant.

“Is the entry clear, captain?” Sevastian shouted through the downpour.

“No. The sandbags have caved in and covered the hole. I have Lukin and Andrianova working on it!” Swiveling with his assault rifle, Mikhail

scanned for the last of the three enemy targets, which was firing at the rest of the Green Berets from atop the third outcropping. Taking aim again, Mikhail readied his finger on the trigger.

He didn't have time to fire. There was a swooshing sound, as if a jet fighter had just buzzed his ear, accompanied by a concussive shockwave that pushed him forward off his feet. The smell of ozone hit his nostrils. The next thing his foggy mind registered was Sevastian slamming to the ground. The senior lieutenant grabbed his right shoulder and screamed.

They'd been attacked from behind.

Turning around, Mikhail searched for the new enemy. What he saw drained the color from his face. There were four more reptiles approaching—and that was only what he could see. Their energy rifles flashing in the storm, they unleashed a new barrage against the humans. A Green Beret was struck, his head cocking sideways as his face was fried off. He spun lifelessly to the ground.

Enemy reinforcements—the thing they couldn't afford. This was no longer about isolating the enemy. It was now pure survival. Helping Sevastian to his feet, Mikhail blazed some minimally-effective suppression fire at the oncoming adversaries. Iosif was already running full-speed toward the dig site. It wasn't cowardice on the part of the burly lieutenant, it was situational awareness. All hands needed to be on the sandbags. It would have been the next order out of Mikhail's mouth. Through grimaces of pain, Sevastian began firing his pistol left-handedly.

"Get to the entryway!" said Mikhail, pushing Sevastian along his way before rotating to seek out Hemingway. The Americans were still battling the final reptile, which had taken to galloping between outcroppings in massive leaps. By the look of it, Hemingway only had three men with him. Mikhail shouted to them just as the Green Berets felled the beast, blood spraying from its neck as a bullet found its mark. *"More coming!"*

Even in the midst of a rainstorm, Mikhail could see the look on Hemingway's face. The moment the American captain laid eyes on the approaching enemies, his expression fell. It was the first indication of anything resembling dread on the face of the Green Beret leader. There was no need for Mikhail to say anything more. All four of the remaining Americans sprinted for the dig site.

By the time Mikhail slid feet-first back into the hole, Nina and Nikolai had amassed an impressive stack of sandbags. The mud-soaked sniper and medic were flinging bags over their shoulders with reckless abandon.

Stopping at the bottom of the pit, Mikhail's attention was grabbed by a different type of stacked object—three mud-caked bodies piled on top of each other.

Breathlessly wiping mud from her face, Nina motioned to the corpses. “The dig team.”

There wasn't time to care. “More hostiles are en route. If we don't get that hole opened in the next sixty seconds, it will be *our* bodies plugging it.” Turning back, he pointed to Hemingway. “Take one of your men and hold them off as long as you can. Tyannikov, go with him. Everyone else, *dig!*” Acknowledging, Hemingway, his teammate, and the wounded Sevastian fired their weapons from the rim of the hole.

Dive. Grab. Toss. Dive. Grab. Toss. Dark gray mud sloshed in every direction. Covered from head to toe, individuals were indistinguishable. They were just bodies throwing bags. Only the suppressors at the top of the hole were spared from the toil. Then Mikhail felt it. It was distinct—instantly recognizable. As he grabbed and yanked at another sandbag, a definable suction pushed past his hands.

The entryway.

Bursting up to the surface, he shouted through mud in his teeth. “We're there! Dig as fast as you can!” It was encouragement and emphasis. They were so close now. They were almost through to...what? Not daylight. Certainly not safety. Mikhail only knew that wherever they were about to go, it was better than where they were now.

Dive. Grab. Toss. Dive. Grab. With every sandbag that was removed, the suction became stronger. Then, the dam broke. The pool's bottom fell out. Suddenly, there was no footing to lose, and they were dragged into the quagmire. Into the ship.

The only things Mikhail felt other than mud were arms and legs flailing in every direction. Then, as quickly as it began, it was over. Bodies hit metal as the mudslide burst out onto the floor. A mass pile-up ensued. As the alien spacecraft had crashed into the earth at a ten-degree angle, the mud flowed across the slick metallic surface, straight toward the rear wall of whatever room they were in. Bodies slammed together as the frantic rush to stand up began.

Slipping and sliding to his feet, Mikhail turned back to the hole. Hemingway, his soldier, and Sevastian were sliding feet-first through the gash in the ship's hull. A panic hit Mikhail. *Can the aliens outside fit too?* No—that was impossible. Mikhail and his comrades were decidedly smaller. There was no way the hulking reptiles would be able to cram

inside. Reaching down to his belt, he grabbed his...

...nothing. His pistol was gone. Another realization struck him. *My rifle is outside!* How many others were now weaponless?

Gunfire erupted from outside of the entryway. Bright blue bolts of energy splashed off the floor and hull. The reptiles might have been too big to fit through the hole, but that wasn't going to stop them from shooting. He grabbed the nearest person still on the ground—Nina. Drenched in muck, the sniper was only identifiable by her figure. "Are you okay?"

Coughing, she wiped her mouth, then spat. She shook her head *no*.

This was out of her element. Nina's specialty was working from a distance, not up close and personal—she was never supposed to enter the ship with them at all. She'd also been hurling sandbags longer than anyone, with the exception of the medic, Nikolai Lukin. She was completely exhausted.

Bullets rang out again, but this time from the human side as the strike team survivors tried to suppress the aliens shooting through the entryway. Pulling Nina up, Mikhail registered his surroundings for the first time. The room they were in was medium-sized. Canisters of every shape and size were strewn about, many of which had slid or been flung to the same angled-down corner the humans had fallen to. There were no built-in light sources in the room, though dim, pulsating light was bleeding in through a door at the far end where Hemingway and his partner were fortifying their position.

Reaching into one of his zippered pouches, Mikhail pulled out a small flashlight—though it slipped out of his muddied grip the instant he pushed in its "on" button. Cursing, he scrambled to grab it as it bounced ahead of him. Lunging forward, he snatched it from its resting place, then pointed it straight ahead. What he saw almost made him drop the light again.

It was a face. A pale-skinned, oval-eyed face. Screaming in shock, Mikhail jolted backwards and collided with Nina.

This thing was not human, nor was it the same as the creatures they were facing outside. This was worse—it was horrifying. It was also already dead. The alien's rubbery, emaciated body was twisted unnaturally where it must have slammed against the wall during the crash. At the bottom of its oversized head, the alien's thin, lipless mouth hung open, a frozen testament to its final moments of agony. As soon as Nina saw the corpse, she gasped sharply.

Gunfire erupted from the doorway where Hemingway and his partner were situated, snapping Mikhail and Nina from their shock. Something

was attacking them from inside the ship.

The humans were in the middle of an alien convergence. The reptiles on the outside were firing relentlessly—there was no doubt that the ones fighting Hemingway were moving in. With nowhere to fall back to, the strike team was on the verge of being overwhelmed. They had to press forward, to get out of this room.

“Cover and fire!” Mikhail shouted. The survivors, whom Mikhail hadn’t even had a chance to evaluate, scrambled for the cover of the various canisters in the room. Mikhail sought out Sevastian. “Lieutenant, give me your pistol!” At best, Sevastian could awkwardly fire it with his functional left hand—he tossed it Mikhail’s way.

Then Mikhail saw it, soaring through the air toward he and the others—a small, spherical object hurled into the room by one of the reptiles outside. He didn’t need to know anything about alien weaponry to know what it was. This was a grenade. “*Get out of the room! Get out of the room! Grenade!*” He had no idea what kind of numbers Hemingway was holding off by the doorway, but right now it didn’t matter. Abandoning their cover, the survivors in the room bolted Hemingway’s direction.

“*Whoa! Stop!*” The American captain’s words were ignored. Thrust ahead into the middle of a firefight, he dove to the ground as the evacuation of the chamber ensued behind him. Then the blast came. The chamber was enveloped with blue plasma as the alien grenade erupted—a shockwave knocked all of the evacuees off their feet, even as they escaped the chamber. Iosif, the last to leave, was blown forward into the wall of the hallway, his face slamming against the metal with a burst of blood. He fell lifelessly backward.

The remnants of the strike team were left little opportunity to recover from the blast. A pair of reptilian aliens—the ones Hemingway had been holding off—were firing at them from down the hall. As one of the remaining Green Berets fell, Mikhail looked for any nearby cover. There were only rooms with closed doors. Then he checked behind him. They were clear there. If they could drop these two reptiles, they could fall back and regroup.

Diving to one side to avoid a blast of energy from one of the aliens, Mikhail rolled to his feet and raised his pistol. His bullet found its mark—one of the aliens’ necks. His second and third bullet left no doubt. The reptile toppled to its knees then fell forward.

Hemingway was already on the other. From his prone position on the tilted floor, the Green Beret leader aimed his M3 and pulled back the

trigger. The reptile stumbled backward, shielding his body with his arms as if that would stop the ballistics. It didn't. As Mikhail and the other Green Berets joined the attack, the alien was overwhelmed. It collapsed.

"Behind!"

It was the worst thing that could have been shouted. "Behind" was where they were supposed to fall back to. Moments ago, "behind" had been clear. The Soviet captain swiveled to face his rear. What he saw next stunned him.

In one fluid motion, Nikolai—his medic—wrapped one arm around Nina, rolled her to the safety of the floor, then propped up on a knee. Grabbing Iosif's abandoned PPSH-41 with his empty hand, Nikolai fired it. The bullets struck the flanking reptile dead center of its forehead. Before the alien's body had even hit the ground, Nikolai was back on his feet, his submachine gun raised and ready. "Clear!"

This man is no medic.

That was a discussion for another time. Right now, their fallback path was open. "Forward and together!" Mikhail said, indicating the direction in front of Nikolai. "Green Berets, secure rear!"

"Yes, sir!"

Taking position next to Nikolai, Mikhail began to stalk forward. Sevastian and Nina followed, with Hemingway and his two remaining soldiers walking backward behind them. Their twelve-man team was down to seven, one of whom, officer or not, wasn't supposed to be on the strike team at all. That meant six of the original dozen were dead. They were effectively at fifty percent.

All along the hallway, running lights flickered like a dwindling pulse in the strange alien ship. The hallway was illuminated only in dim, intermittent moments. The slant of the spacecraft, while off-balancing, was manageable. Within ten steps, their constant pull to the right had been compensated for.

Based on their orientation, Mikhail was certain they were heading deeper into the spacecraft rather than toward its wingtips. Just the same, going deeper wasn't his priority. Regrouping was. So when they approached the first open door he'd seen along the way, he directed Nikolai to enter it. The "medic" did, indicating no hostiles shortly thereafter. Holding his position at point, Mikhail directed those behind him to duck into the room. As soon as they did, he backed in himself.

"What the hell just happened?" one of the Green Berets asked

breathlessly, hands on his knees as he looked at Hemingway.

Reloading his M3, Hemingway answered, “We got punched in the mouth.”

Mikhail was searching by the side of the door for some kind of way to close it. Coming across something that looked like a button, he punched it. Nothing happened. Either he was doing something wrong or the door had no power. “Everyone, back up.” Walking across and up the slanted room, the group of seven put some distance between themselves and the doorway. He looked at the nearest Green Beret. “Keep watch outside the door. If something appears, shoot it.”

The American nodded. “Yes, sir.”

This room was completely unlike the one by the entryway. There were no canisters or boxes anywhere. Blue tubes lined the walls with what seemed to be some sort of liquid flowing through them. The same dim, pulsating lights that had been in the hallways were present here. In the center of the floor was a large, circular depression, easily large enough for several people to stand in. Although curious as to the room’s purpose, Mikhail had more pressing matters. This was a time to regroup.

Gaze returning to the crew, he surveyed who remained. Hemingway was down to two soldiers, though they both seemed in fighting condition. On his own side, Mikhail was down to three. Sevastian was wounded—the extent of which, Mikhail wasn’t sure. But judging by the way the senior lieutenant was keeping his right shoulder locked against his chest, it was more than just a mere hindrance.

As for Nina, the sniper was leaning against the wall, buckled over on her knees with her palms against her eyes and her fingers stuck through her mud-caked hair. *She is uninjured. She will be fine.* It didn’t matter that she wasn’t supposed to be there. She was part of the strike team now.

That left Nikolai Lukin.

Mikhail’s focus shifted to his “medic.” Eyes already on Mikhail, Nikolai’s posture seemed to indicate, somewhat defiantly, that he knew the game was up. Hands on his hips, the mud-covered operative said nothing. That was fine with Mikhail—he had more than enough to say himself. “Who are you?”

Though Nikolai was looking directly at Mikhail, he remained tellingly silent.

Breaking the silence, Hemingway said, “He’s Spetsnaz.”

That was already what Mikhail was thinking. He just wanted to hear it from Nikolai himself. “I said, who are you?” After another non-answer,

Mikhail raised his pistol. He aimed it straight for Nikolai's head. "We have already lost half of our men. One more will not make a difference."

Very faintly, Nikolai's pupils shifted to focus on the Americans. Inhaling slowly, the Russian agent answered. "I am under the Main Intelligence Directorate."

As soon as he heard it, Mikhail closed his eyes and lowered his pistol. The Main Intelligence Directorate. Spetsnaz GRU. They sent him an elite covert agent. Looking up again, Mikhail simply asked, "Why?"

"You are not an idiot—"

"Why?" Mikhail shouted sharply. Along the wall, Nina flinched.

The stare Nikolai gave him was soulless and cold. When he answered, his voice was unwavering. "You already know."

Hemingway and his Green Berets listened in silence.

Yes, Mikhail knew. And for all practical purposes, so did the Americans now—or at least, they knew something was suspect. That was enough to force the issue into the spotlight.

The conversation Mikhail knew he was about to have went against everything he'd believed in prior to the mission. About countering the Americans and keeping them at arm's distance. About not trusting them. But now, what choice did he have but to address this? Hemingway was no fool. In revealing himself, by necessity or not, Nikolai had essentially shown the Americans the Soviet Union's hand. Like it or not, believe in it or not, it was time to explain. The Americans were onto them. What choice did Mikhail have? And so he faced Hemingway.

"There was concern among our higher ranks that you would betray us. The fear was that you would kill us once the mission was finished, then use the technology in this vessel to lay siege to the world, as you did with Japan. Only by surviving *you* could we hold your country accountable." He glanced at Nikolai. "And he was sent to give us an advantage." If the Green Berets made their move to kill the Soviets, chances were they wouldn't have started with the medic. That would have given Nikolai time to react.

Quietly, Nikolai spoke. "They sent two of us. Vikhrov was my partner."

Yuri Vikhrov. Their engineer. The two lowest-ranking officers on the Soviet side of the mission had both been covert agents. Mikhail shouldn't have been surprised.

"Obviously," Nikolai said, "things did not go as planned."

"What exactly were you gonna do to ensure your survival?" one of the Green Berets asked. "Kill us once the ship was secure?"

Nikolai eyed him coldly. "You say that as if it's a bad thing."

The Green Beret lunged toward Nikolai. Mikhail stepped between them before contact could be made. “This is not the time!” He eyed the Green Beret’s name tag: Reed. “Listen, Reed, you have to understand our position.”

Face twisted in a scowl, Reed pushed himself away. “Yeah, I bet you’d like us to understand your position—”

“Corporal,” said Hemingway.

“—so the moment our back is turned you—”

“*Corporal!*”

Going silent, Reed looked back at his captain.

Hemingway’s expression was stoic. “Were we in their shoes, we’d have been ordered to do the same thing.” He stepped between both his soldiers, then looked at Mikhail. “I can assure you our orders weren’t to eliminate you at *any* point in this operation. From one man to another, I give you my word. What else do I need to give you for us to continue this operation?”

For Mikhail, nothing. That Hemingway was playing peacemaker was enough. There was no way for Mikhail to know if the Green Beret’s words were truthful, but that didn’t matter now anyway. The two sides needed each other to survive. If treachery needed to be dealt with, it’d be dealt with later. “As far as I’m concerned, the Cold War just ended.” It was a statement he didn’t fully believe. But what else could he say?

“That’s good to hear,” said Hemingway.

Back to business. “What is your other soldier’s name?” He motioned to the Green Beret watching the hall.

“Sparks. Both men are corporals.”

Nodding, Mikhail said, “I have Sevastian Tyannikov, my senior lieutenant, and Miss Nina Andrianova, sniper specialist.” That they had been working together without bothering to introduce themselves was a sign of the level of distrust that had existed. “And we both know Mr. Lukin now.” He looked at Nikolai. “So is any part of you medically trained?” Nikolai nodded. “Then tend to Tyannikov.”

“Da, *captain*,” Nikolai said less-than-flatteringly. He approached Sevastian to examine his shoulder.

Mikhail’s focus shifted to Reed. “I want you to backtrack to the doorway by the entryway. Take whatever you can from the men we lost there. Weapons, ammunition, whatever would be useful.” He had a hunch that part of the ship was clear. It was the deeper interior they needed to worry about. “Go.”

For a moment, Reed hesitated—until a stern look from Hemingway prompted the corporal's cooperation. Readying his M3, Reed slipped out the doorway. Mikhail turned to Hemingway. "Whatever time we have now will not last long. Those creatures outside, they will soon alert the rest of their crew that we are here—if they have not done so already. Do you have communication with your general?"

The look Hemingway gave him was all the answer Mikhail needed. "That's the first thing I tried when we got in this room," the American answered. "There's too much interference coming from the ship. We've got nothing."

Testing his own radio, Mikhail experienced the same thing. Nothing but static. *Damn it.* With no communication, there was no way to alert the rest of the Americans that they had made it inside. There was no way to signal the frontal assault. The last thing the Americans saw was Nina leading Mikhail and his team toward the ship. She never even made it back to them. For all Mikhail knew, they thought the infiltration team was dead. That conclusion would only be strengthened with those reptiles lurking about the dig site.

"We talked about this possibility beforehand," Hemingway said. "Communication going dark once we got inside. We agreed that we didn't necessarily *need* to know that things were going well inside the ship—just the confirmation that we made it inside. But they don't even have that."

Nina would have been confirmation. But she never returned to the jeeps. They were truly alone. Looking at his sniper, Mikhail asked, "Can you manage in close combat?"

Propping up from the wall, Nina nodded.

"Here," Mikhail said, removing the Makarov pistol he'd claimed from Sevastian and handing it to her. "Take this. Here is some ammunition."

"Think your weapons survived their torture test?" Hemingway asked.

Mikhail nodded. "What few we have left, yes."

Moments later, Reed returned through the doorway with the salvaged equipment from the fallen Green Beret and Iosif. Setting the salvage on the floor, he picked up a canteen and addressed Nina. "Miss." Tossing it to her, he then looked at Mikhail. "For the lady to wash her head."

Faintly, Mikhail smiled. *Perhaps a good man, after all.* Glancing back at Nina, he nodded in approval. His focus returned to the weapons on the floor. Iosif's Makarov was there, along with his PPSH-41 ammunition. "Who's good?" he asked, looking around.

"Good," Sparks said from his position in the hall. Reed and Hemingway

affirmed, too. All three Americans still had their submachine guns.

Nikolai would be fine. He already had Iosif's PPsh-41, and he could take the extra ammunition. Giving the extra Makarov to Sevastian, that left Mikhail as the only weaponless soldier. Bending down, he picked up the M3.

"You know how to work that thing?" asked Hemingway.

Claiming the weapons' extra ammunition, he tested the M3's weight in his hands. "I learn quickly." Looking back at Nina, he saw her massage her head under the flow of canteen water, her black hair reemerging from the muck. Slicking it back and wiping her face, she tossed the canteen back to Reed.

"Spasibo," she said, a faint smile showing. "Thank you."

Mikhail shifted to his other troops. Nikolai was still working on Sevastian's arm. "How is he doing?"

"The wound is cauterized," Nikolai answered. "There's no bleeding or lodged projectile. Just damage. Morphine should be taking effect soon, so the pain should diminish." He stepped aside to reveal the shirtless Sevastian's shoulder. The moment Mikhail saw it, he grimaced. Everything from the right side of Sevastian's chest to his bicep was a twisted, charred wreck. "For all practical purposes, his clavicle and rotator cuff are destroyed."

Holding his pistol with his left hand, Sevastian spoke through quivering lips. "I won't be as accurate, but I'll do what I can."

The impulse to immediately say *no* was strong. Having a soldier who was almost totally non-effective in combat was the last thing Mikhail needed. But Sevastian's well-being was also at stake. What if the aliens found him here? He'd have no chance. More than they needed him, he needed *them*. "All right," Mikhail said. "Put your uniform back on, try your best not to *look* injured. Do some damage."

"Da, captain." Wincing, he slid back into his outfit.

So this is it. This is the entry team. A pistol-wielding sniper who wasn't supposed to be there, a Spetsnaz GRU medic, an incapacitated executive officer, and three American Green Berets. Seven mud-covered survivors of an infiltration gone to hell. Ready to M3, Mikhail surveyed his team. Broken, but alive. At least that said something. "We move in three rows. Lukin, you move with me. Sparks and Andrianova, surround Tyannikov in the middle. Captain Hemingway and Reed will take the rear." It was basic, but that was fine. "The reptiles are vulnerable in the head and neck. Shoot only when you can hit. We need to conserve ammo." The group

acknowledged. “Be aware: there is a second type of alien here. I saw one dead in the entry room. It was gray, and very thin, like a starving child. I do not know what it can do.

“We will move forward through the vessel toward its center. We do not need communication to alert the American forces that we are here. If we can create enough chaos, it might attract the attention of the aliens outside. If the Americans see that, they can move forward with the frontal assault.” That was still why they were there. That was still what they were going to do.

Giving the order to move out, Mikhail and his team abandoned the safety of whatever the room was they’d been sitting in. Submachine guns ready, they tracked into the halls and began their trek inward into the belly of the beast.

It was time to go on the attack.

4

1524 hours

MIKHAIL STRAINED EVERY sense as he led his team through the flickering corridors. His muddied palms gripped his borrowed M3 with fierce determination. He felt a strong inclination to pull the weapon's trigger, as if the act itself would place a target in view. That was how close-quarters combat always felt.

Lighting was intermittent throughout the corridor, pulsing on and off as if whatever power source was feeding it was struggling to survive. The lights themselves ran like veins along the top corners of the halls—a design Mikhail had never seen anywhere on Earth. The flickering, combined with the slant of the ship, formed an atmosphere as unsettling as it was unnatural.

The corridor ended into a solid metal door that was sealed shut. Though there'd been several doors along the route, no sounds had emanated from any of them. For all practical purposes, it seemed that they were leaving a dead section of the ship.

The soldiers split along both sides of the hallway as they neared the door, their weapons drawn and ready as each step took them closer to whatever lay on the other side. Mikhail scanned for some kind of door mechanism. There was a depressed panel to the door's right. That had to be something. As he approached it, he signaled for the others to hold behind him. They instinctively knelt to firing positions, weapons aimed at the door.

The panel appeared to have some sort of screen, but everything was dark. Several buttons were visible, each with a strange symbol, but pressing them did nothing. *Come on, Mikhail, figure this out!* He'd had the same problem trying to close the first room they'd entered. Was it a power issue, or his own cluelessness? He had a suspicion it was a combination of both. He hit the buttons again. Nothing. Shaking his head and cursing, he looked around the panel for anything he was missing. It was all there in front of him—and it was totally dead. Angrily, he banged his fist against

the panel. At some point, something needed to go right.

Suddenly, the overhead lights went full-blast; the hallways were completely illuminated. A vibration came to the entire area—Mikhail leapt back and raised his M3.

“What did you do?” asked Nikolai.

“Nothing, I did nothing!” There was no way a fist to the wall had done this—this was something else. The spacecraft was getting its power back.

Something crackled along the veins of ceiling lights. A rasping alien voice emerged, seemingly from the lights themselves, and repeated the same phrase over and over again, like some kind of warning. Ahead, the door panel lit up. A mechanical whir emerged from the door’s housing; it was opening. The whole of the strike team readied their weapons as Mikhail fell back into formation. The door slid into the wall.

Hostiles appeared.

Two reptiles and one gray alien were gathered along a series of wall panels on the other side of the door. By the time they saw Mikhail and his team, weapons were already being fired. A barrage of .45 APC rounds was slung toward the extraterrestrials, who were in no position to counter. Head and neck shots struck true even as the human soldiers stalked forward. Mikhail and his team crossed the door’s threshold as the aliens toppled backward.

Past the fallen aliens, the hallway opened into a spacious, elongated chamber that looked roughly twenty meters long. Metallic doors sealed the room at both ends, with the rearmost door following the ship’s downward slant. “Clear,” Hemingway said, taking position to cover it. Reed knelt alongside him, submachine gun poised and ready.

Before Mikhail could make any sort of declaration, the door at the opposite end of the chamber opened. Two more reptiles. Bursts from Mikhail and Nikolai felled them, but the quick kills ended there. Past the fresh corpses, a third reptile dove for the cover of a right-hand turn further up the hallway. Using the corner as cover, the alien fired a flurry of blue energy bolts the humans’ way. Though none of the bolts struck, it was enough to force Mikhail’s team to duck out of the elongated chamber and back into the hall they’d entered from.

We cannot lose ground—not here! If the aliens were allowed to force Mikhail’s team backward, this was going to be a quick mission. Sliding to the corner of the chamber, Mikhail leaned around and fired a suppressing shot at the reptile. Glancing behind, Mikhail looked at the door on the lower side of the chamber. It was still closed. “Hemingway, Reed, open

that door! The rest of you, suppress!” The concept of suppression went against his own declaration of *shoot only when you can hit*, but in this instance, they had no choice. They had to move forward or they’d be flushed backward.

Diving to the center of the chamber from the hall, Nikolai raised his PPSH-41 and released a volley toward the hostile, forcing it back around the corner. Sparks joined alongside the Spetsnaz. The two of them, combined with Mikhail’s fire from around his own cover, were enough to momentarily hold the alien at bay.

“Let me get to where you are,” Nina said to Mikhail, still covered behind him. Her pistol raised, she eyed him sternly. “Trust me.”

She’s still a sniper. “Take position,” he said quickly, spinning away from the corner as she took his spot. Mikhail’s focus shifted to Hemingway and Reed. “How is it coming with that door?” he shouted.

No sooner had Mikhail asked the question, Hemingway and Reed leapt back from the door as it slid up into the ceiling. “It’s open and we’re clear!” the American captain said.

Mikhail spun back to the firefight. Nikolai, Nina, Sevastian, and Sparks were suppressing what were now four distinct sources of alien weapons fire coming from around the corner far ahead. Moments later, four became three, as one of Nina’s pistol rounds plugged an alien dead center in its throat the instant it showed its head.

Unclipping a grenade from his belt, Mikhail ripped out the pin in his teeth. “Now pay attention to *this*,” he murmured, hurling the grenade down the hallway. As it bounced toward the corner, the three remaining aliens held their fire. “Everyone, come!” Mikhail shouted, motioning for them to follow through the lower-side door. “Same position—Nikolai, up front!” They reassumed formation just as the aliens opened fire again. But the extraterrestrials’ offensive was short-lived, as Mikhail’s grenade erupted in the hallway. The walls trembled amid the sound of reptilian screeching. Mikhail didn’t bother looking back. Whether the three around the corner were wounded, dead, or dying, the humans were now officially a force to be reckoned with. That was all that mattered.

The seven-man team was now hustling down a new hallway—the downward angle at which they traveled adding to their momentum. The hallway seemed identical to the one the aliens had been covering in the opposite direction. There was a sharp, ninety-degree turn to the left that Mikhail could only assume led further into the ship’s center.

One of the hallway doors they were passing opened—the entire group flinched and aimed their weapons. Standing in the open door frame was a single gray alien. It gazed at the group with its opaque, bulbous black eyes.

Sparks, the nearest soldier to the creature, grabbed it by its uniform and shoved it straight into the room. Mikhail followed the Green Beret inside. “Lukin, Reed, watch the hall!” The two men complied as Mikhail, Hemingway, Sparks, and Nina surrounded their gray captive. Sevastian propped himself against the wall.

Though frail in build, the gray alien was almost more horrible than the reptiles. It was almost—*almost*—humanlike. That borderline similarity was downright disturbing. Even amid the instinctive nature of combat, the insanity of what they were facing had never escaped Mikhail fully. These were beings they’d never seen before—that humans had never seen before. They were freakish. In many ways, they seemed wrong. But there they were. There was an impulse in Mikhail to strike at the gray alien. To beat it repeatedly, incessantly. He recognized it mostly as fear. And so it was restrained.

“What do you want here?” asked Mikhail sharply in Russian, as if the alien would understand the question. The inquiry was more emotional than rational. These beings were on their planet. The desire to know *why* was overwhelming, even if it led to the asking of unanswerable questions. His language returned to English. “Why have you come to us?”

Nikolai watched from the doorway. “Why don’t you try French? Maybe he understands that.”

“Zatkni,” spat Nina.

“He understands me,” Mikhail said, glaring at the alien face-to-face. “You understand me, don’t you, demon?”

Stepping back, Hemingway said, “We should kill it.”

Mikhail didn’t want to kill it. Not yet. “Did you think we would roll over and die for you? Did you think we wouldn’t fight back?” These were things he needed to say. Things he needed to release. He was pulled away from his daughter for this creature. He could die and leave Kseniya with only a memory of her father because of it. “We will destroy you all.” Now he was ready. “Kill it,” he said to Hemingway, standing and taking a step away. Hemingway aimed his pistol.

The sensation struck Mikhail suddenly—before he had even turned fully around. It was like a pulse, a grab. Different from anything he’d ever felt before. Panic swept over him as a voice emerged in his mind.

Listen.

Then the shot rang out. As the alien's head rocked backward, Mikhail found himself stumbling against the wall of the room, as if the bullet had impacted both he and the creature. Pain swelled in his mind; it was unbearable. Grabbing his head, he screamed through clenched teeth.

Something was in his head. A sound—a piercing ring that reverberated from one side of his mind to the other. Everything and everyone around him faded away. Images sparked through his brain like an avalanche of memories, none of which were his. Outer space. A small blue planet. An eruption of fire, then a crash. Communication was down. A loss of signal. His job—that was his job. Then they would come.

In the immediacy of the moment, none of it made sense. Then, as the endless seconds passed, the thoughts melded together. The planet was Earth. It was being approached. The explosion was the American nuclear missile, followed by the crash. He'd been inside the alien's mind.

Communication was down, there in the ship. The aliens couldn't contact their homeworld. That was what that particular gray alien was working toward: repairing communications. He was one of many focused on the task. Once their relays were back online...

...then the rest would come.

Hands grabbed Mikhail; he was expelled from the thoughts. Eyes blinking, he focused ahead. It was Nina. The others were behind her. They were all looking at him. Mikhail could see her mouth the word *captain*, but no sound came out. He only heard one word, repeated over and over.

Listen. Listen. Listen. Listen.

Then it stopped. The sounds of the present washed in like a great rushing of water. Mikhail's motor function returned, and he swatted Nina's hands away.

"Listen!" Mikhail shouted, blinking confusedly as the word came out. He tried again. "Listen!" Gritting his teeth and growling, he forced out something else. "I'm all right!"

Hemingway and Sparks stepped away as Nina rose to her feet. Even from the hallway where they were supposed to be keeping post, Nikolai and Reed's eyes were fixated on Mikhail.

Back-stepping from him, Nina asked, "What happened?" Next to her, Hemingway's finger rested on the trigger of his submachine gun. He, too, stared at Mikhail in bewilderment.

In Mikhail's mind, things were starting to make sense. Pushing up to his feet, he looked at the fallen gray alien. There was a look of open-mouthed finality frozen on the being's face. It was trying to communicate

with him. Through his mind. It had only managed to get out the word *listen* before Hemingway's weapon silenced it for good. But what was everything else? What were those flashes, those glimpses at the alien's memories and purpose? No sooner was the question posed, the answer came. Those were the alien's most recent experiences with life. At the onset of death, they had flashed—and Mikhail had been caught up in it.

"What just happened, Kirov?" Hemingway asked. "You still with us?"

Nodding, Mikhail answered, "Give me a moment to clear my head." His brain was throbbing with the worst pain he'd ever experienced. It had to be due to the mental connection. "I know what they're doing."

Nina cocked her head strangely. "What do you mean?"

"The aliens." He looked at the gray's corpse. "Or at least, this one." How was he going to explain this? From the beginning. "I think it tried to communicate with me, right before Hemingway shot it. I felt it speak in my mind. It said 'listen,' then you pulled the trigger." He glanced non-accusingly at the American captain. "I know it was from the alien."

The looks on the other six's faces were far less skeptical than Mikhail had anticipated. Perhaps in the wake of UFOs, giant reptiles, and strange energy weapons, they were more open to what would normally have been considered lunacy.

Shaking his head, Mikhail tried to explain further. "I felt it, for the quickest of moments—a connection. It is difficult to explain, but it was a presence in my thoughts that was not my own. And when you killed the alien, it was like a floodgate opened, even if just for a moment. I saw the alien's memories, what it was doing." He looked at the corpse again. "He was helping to restore communication to the ship. That was the priority task. If communication was restored, they could contact the others—I presume that meant other extraterrestrials." He wasn't sure how else to interpret it.

Hemingway seemed to be taking everything in at face value. Kneeling down several feet away, he looked at Mikhail stoically. "So you're saying that's what this ship's crew is currently trying to do? Restore communication to signal the rest of their...whatever. Right?"

"I can only tell you what I experienced," answered Mikhail. "I have never felt anything like this before." He resisted the urge to say, *you have to believe me*. It would have made him feel crazy.

Nodding his head, Hemingway rose. "If that's what it said, that's what we go by."

The look on Mikhail's face must have echoed his surprise. Hemingway

believed him, without question. Why? Without Mikhail needing to ask aloud, the American captain addressed it.

“You’re the best your country could send for this mission. I’m gonna take a step of faith and trust you’re not crazy or an idiot. Because, frankly, if you’re right, we don’t have much time.”

Reed stepped into the room. “And if he’s wrong, sir?” His gaze stayed on Mikhail.

“At this juncture,” Hemingway answered, looking at his soldier, “I don’t think it matters.”

Trust. Even with an extraterrestrial spacecraft looming over the hills, trust had been the biggest question mark throughout this operation. But that was starting to change. If the Americans wanted an excuse to take control of the operation, this would have been the perfect opportunity. But Hemingway didn’t. Mikhail’s stare lingered on the Green Beret leader, eye contact maintained between the two of them. Nodding his head appreciatively, Mikhail readied his M3.

“I don’t suppose that thing told you where we need to go?” Hemingway asked.

“Unfortunately, no,” said Mikhail. “Your bullet was a little too fast for that.”

The American captain waved his soldiers onward, then looked at Mikhail. “We should split up. Two teams will move through the ship faster. Find whatever communication system they’re trying to restore.”

“I agree,” answered Mikhail. He and his fellow humans had been thoroughly outmatched at the outset—but the outset had passed. The last thing Mikhail had seen the aliens do was bleed. Three and four-man teams suddenly didn’t seem so insignificant.

Sparks angled his head to one side. “How will we know what their communication system looks like?”

Indicating for Nina and Nikolai to approach him, Mikhail answered, “Ask every hostile you see. If they don’t answer, shoot them.” Hemingway cracked the faintest of smirks. “One team should press forward. Continue in the direction we were all heading. The other should backtrack to the hallway where I threw the grenade.”

“We’ll do that,” Hemingway said.

No—go that way yourself. “No, we will,” Mikhail said. Green Berets present or not, if any side was returning to a known hot zone, it was going to be Soviet. “Continue down this corridor. Create as much damage as you can. We will do the same in the other direction.”

Hemingway seemed to hesitate. “You sure?” Very briefly, his eyes shifted to Nina.

The sniper noticed. Her brown eyes narrowing, she set her jaw and tied her hair into a ponytail. “Don’t worry, capitalist. The team with the woman will do fine.”

“We will head back, then progress beyond the turn we abandoned,” Mikhail said. “If you see a gray one, kill it first. Who knows what they could do if they get inside your head.”

“Aye, aye.”

“We may end up running parallel to each other. If so, we will see you on the other side.” No room for failure. “Make them hurt.”

Raising his M3, Hemingway motioned to his men. “Let’s move, Berets.” Offering Mikhail a final nod, the Americans flitted around the corner, toward the downward slope to the ship’s rear, leaving their Soviet counterparts behind.

Mikhail surveyed his team. Himself with an American M3, a GRU medic with a PPsh-41, a sniper legend with a Makarov pistol, and an executive officer who could barely fight at all. Even still, *unconventional* wasn’t the word that came to mind. The word that surfaced in Mikhail’s head was *professional*. “How is everyone on ammunition?”

“Good,” answered Nina.

Nikolai half-frowned. “Good enough.”

Even without elaboration, Mikhail knew the difference between “good” and “good enough” was significant. But any degree of *good* was better than *bad*. Kneeling briefly, he said, “Nikolai, you move forward with me. Nina, watch our rear.” With the Americans storming the other direction, attacks from the rear shouldn’t have been huge threats. But even a small threat, if not kept in check, could take them all down.

“I should take point, captain,” said Nina.

“You have a pistol,” Mikhail answered. “What we need up front is firepower.”

She stood her ground. “What you need in front is the conservation of ammunition. No one else can kill more hostiles with as few bullets as me.”

Did it matter that Nina was carrying a pistol instead of a sniper rifle? Perhaps she had a point.

Studying Mikhail’s expression, Nikolai tilted his head warningly. “Captain...”

“Take point with me,” Mikhail said to Nina. He shifted to Nikolai. “Conserve your ammunition, watch the rear.” For a moment, it looked

as if Nikolai would argue. But the Spetsnaz kept silent. Speaking to Nina again, Mikhail said, "I will give you first opportunity to fire, but only for a second. Hit your marks."

"Thank you, captain." She dipped her head appreciatively.

Lastly, Mikhail's focus shifted to Sevastian. The morphine was kicking in, and Sevastian seemed to be moving in less obvious pain. It was a far cry from being wholly effective, but Mikhail would take what he could get. "Are you all right, Tyannikov?"

Sevastian nodded. "I am still your senior lieutenant." Ready with his pistol in his left hand, he waited by the door. "I am ready to fight, captain."

Of all the personnel involved in this operation, Mikhail respected Sevastian the most. The man was determined, even in the midst of near-incapacitation. That was what they needed. "Cover the rear with Lukin."

"Yes, captain."

It was well past time to get going. They needed to move. He spared one last glance at the dead alien on the floor—the alien that had tried to tap into his mind at the wrong time. The alien that might have just given them an edge.

Indicating for Nina to take to his side, Mikhail raised his weapon and exited the room.

As the four-person Soviet team made their way back to the elongated chamber, Mikhail found himself leading the group through the haze of smoke created by the grenade he had thrown. He hadn't waited around long enough to see if it'd done any damage, though the lack of an alien presence in the chamber itself told him that if nothing else, it had staved off an advance. Whether the aliens had fallen back or taken cover nearby was yet to be determined.

The Soviets were nearing the turn where Mikhail's grenade had gone off, their weapons raised and ready to fire. Through the light smoke, the green-bloodied body of one giant reptile could be seen slumped against the wall.

Raising his hand to signal a slowdown, Mikhail pushed himself against the wall as he and Nina neared the corner. M3 ready, he approached the turn. Spinning around it, he raised the submachine gun and scanned the hall, Nina making the turn with her pistol a split-second later.

Thank God. Sprawled out in the hallway, several meters down, were the mangled bodies of the other three reptiles. His grenade had been

true—none of the reptiles had escaped its blast.

“Captain,” whispered Nina behind him. Mikhail looked back, where the sniper was crouching down by the first fallen reptile’s body. As soon as Mikhail focused on the alien, he knew why she was calling him.

The fallen reptile was still breathing.

Nikolai raised his PPsh-41 to fire a kill-shot. “Wait,” said Mikhail, motioning for the Spetsnaz to lower his weapon. The reptile was bleeding heavily, parts of its body reduced to mangled pulp. Even a side of its face was deformed, one eye clearly missing from a socket. “Save your ammunition for the ones that can fire back,” Mikhail said. This one was no longer a threat.

The Spetsnaz nodded.

Focusing down the corridor, Mikhail motioned for his comrades to follow him. There was a four-way intersection ahead. Mikhail quickly assigned each operative a direction to cover. No reptiles or gray aliens were anywhere to be seen.

“Which way?” asked Nina.

“This way,” Mikhail said, pointing to the forward section of the ship. He was completely confident that the bridge was in that direction. It was the strangest gut instinct he’d ever experienced—his only explanation was that it was related to the connection he’d experienced earlier. That didn’t make it any less unsettling. Mikhail made his move to track down the corridor, his comrades following. Nothing popped its head out, nothing challenged them. It was as if all the ship’s occupants had been dealt with.

Suddenly, a new sound emerged—one unlike any they’d experienced in the ship before. A rhythmic, repetitive clanking. Something solid, with weight. A lot of weight.

Up ahead of them, a new adversary rounded the corner. All four of the Soviets stopped. Like the reptiles they’d fought previously, this enemy carried a large energy rifle. But this was no reptile. It was massive; its body was covered from head to toe in metallic viridian armor, like some kind of mechanical guardian. Raising its rifle, it marched straight toward them.

Both it and the Soviets opened fire.

The Soviets’ bullets ricocheted off the walls and floor, and most alarmingly, off the guardian itself. Nina’s headshots bounced off the machine’s helmet as if she was slinging pebbles. As the guardian opened fire, Mikhail and company dove aside to avoid its blasts. “Fall back! Fall back!” Scrambling to their feet, the Soviets sprinted for the four-way intersection. But they wouldn’t all reach it. Sevastian, the wounded senior

lieutenant, took an energy bolt square in the back. Spewing blood, he fell forward onto the hallway floor and lay still.

Mikhail had seen Sevastian take the hit and swore in frustration, but there was nothing he could do. His XO was dead; slowing down to address the issue would leave Mikhail dead, too.

“What the hell *is* that thing?” Nina screamed, taking position around one of the turns to fire at it again. Another headshot—another ricochet. This titan was impervious. Marching fearlessly down the center of the hall toward them, it methodically sprayed fire in their direction. It would be on them in a matter of seconds.

“Split up!” Mikhail yelled, pointing for his comrades to each choose a direction. That thing couldn’t follow all of them. Whichever person it chose to pursue, it could be assaulted from behind by the two others. Mikhail dashed for the corridor that continued deeper, Nina opting for the one that led to the ship’s backside. Nikolai sunk back to the direction they’d come from. “Don’t surrender your rear!” The last thing any of them needed was to be attacked from behind by something else.

The towering guardian emerged into the hallway—once again, Mikhail and his team opened fire. Pivoting its head toward Mikhail, the mechanical behemoth turned in his direction without slowing its advance. It was heading straight for him.

Panic struck. Scrambling backward, Mikhail flung himself from one side of the hall to the other to avoid the relentless blasts of energy the guardian was hurling at him. There was nowhere to hide. Nowhere to run. A searing pain struck his left shoulder; Mikhail screamed as one of the energy bolts pegged him. Falling back-first onto the metal, he rolled against the wall just in time to narrowly avoid a fatal shot. But it was delaying the inevitable. He could hear the weapons fire of his comrades, the ricochets of their bullets off the metallic titan. He could smell the char of own skin.

Lunging to the nearest wall, Mikhail slammed against a nearby closed door with all of his body weight, slapping the control panel desperately. Something beeped. The door slid upward. As blue energy soared past his head, Mikhail fell forward into the unfamiliar room. Stumbling over objects on the floor, he found himself flailing forward into a small, dimly-lit chamber. Things were scattered everywhere, apparently strewn from shelves during the crash. As he hurried to right himself, he surveyed the mess. Containers, devices, pieces of what seemed to be cloth or fabric. Nothing of use. He whipped his head around. The rhythmic, clunking

footsteps of the guardian approached. It would round the corner at any second.

He scanned the room frantically. Something—there had to be *something*! He threw the containers aside. There was nothing in any of them. The fabric seemed to be mesh-like, like the alien equivalent of gauze. Useless to him. Scrambling to his feet, he scampered across the room, losing his balance and falling toward the corner just as he heard the guardian slow to round the turn. It was upon him.

He reached for his M3; it was gone, lost in his desperate retreat. He had nothing.

Then he saw it.

It was piled up in the next corner nearest him, its red sheen unmistakable against the drab-colored objects scattered around it. A weapon. An extraterrestrial rifle, like the ones that'd been unleashed on him and his crew. He had no clue how to operate it, but it was all he had left. Pushing up with his left hand, adrenaline staving off whatever pain should have been there, he propelled himself toward the corner, his hands curling around the butt of the weapon. Though alien, its form was at least vaguely familiar—and he'd seen more than enough of it in the hands of the enemy. Picking it up, he immediately felt the weapon's weight. It was as cumbersome as it looked. Mikhail's awkwardness was only intensified by the fact that his left arm didn't quite seem to be functioning properly. Slinging the rifle around as best he could and falling back against the corner, he grunted and propped the weapon against his right shoulder. The guardian pivoted to face him.

Mikhail had no clue where the trigger was or how it worked. He only knew there was a place to put one hand, and a place to put the other—the closest thing he could find to a stock and a trigger guard. He set his hands in place. The guardian raised its rifle. Mikhail's fired first.

The Soviet captain had no idea how he'd activated the weapon. He only knew that his hands had done enough panicked fiddling to find the right mechanism. There was a blast of blue energy. A wave of heat washed over his face.

Then there was a scream. It was metallic—piercing. The stress of an overloading machine. A strain of technology. As Mikhail's eyes adjusted to the blue flash, they registered the guardian slumped against the wall. Its weapon lay abandoned on the floor. Sparks cascaded from its chest. Trembling, the guardian clambered to its feet.

Forcing himself upright, Mikhail aimed the alien rifle once more. His

fingers and hands explored; he rediscovered the firing mechanism. There was another flash of blue, and the guardian slammed back against the wall. He fired again, and again, overkill he was glad to exercise. When the blue haze vanished, the guardian was a smoldering wreck.

Shoving to his feet, Mikhail lifted the alien weapon again, its weight making it nigh-impossible to aim properly. Just the same, it was all he had. At least if he ran across another guardian, he had a weapon that could bring it down. Lumbering toward the chamber door, he reentered the hall.

“Kirov!” Nina said, rushing to his side. “Are you all right?”

The look in her eyes was enough to indicate to Mikhail that whatever damage had been done to his shoulder, it was severe. Seeing for himself only confirmed it. His shoulder was wide open. Charred flesh reeked beneath his uniform; burnt muscle was exposed in open air. He was almost as bad off as Sevastian had been. As soon as he saw it, the pain set in. Mikhail slammed his head back against the wall. It was as if glowing hot coals were being twisted into his skin. In several places, his flesh had grafted itself into his uniform. It burned with every move that he made.

“All right,” Nina said, flushed, wide-eyed, and without anything to say afterward. She looked desperately back to Nikolai, who was facing them in the hallway, knelt down with his weapon ready. Her eyes shot back to Mikhail.

The pain was insufferable, but the mission demanded it be tolerated. Through gritted teeth, Mikhail reached for his M3.

Nina stopped him. “No! You cannot fight like this.”

“We cannot stop now. We have no choice.” Locating his M3 on the floor, he kicked it toward Nina and motioned for her Makarov. “Take my weapon and give me your pistol.” He continued talking without hesitating—without giving her a chance to cut in. “The metal creatures, they are robots. I do not know if they have any weakness to our weapons. I will keep this alien gun in case we cross another one.”

She tightened her grip on his collar. “*Stop.*” Glaring through sweat-soaked strands of hair, she spoke to him firmly. “We must get to you safety—the Americans can finish this.”

“We will proceed to the bridge of this spaceship. We will find a way to deactivate it, then we will hunker down and wait for the Americans to begin their offensive.” It was as much wishful thinking as a legitimate plan—he had no clue if an offensive would ever actually occur. At some point, the Americans would get impatient. They *had* to.

“Lukin and I will continue to the bridge ourselves,” Nina said. “I will

pull rank if I must.” Tugging him to his feet, she looked back at Nikolai. “Get ready to—” Her remaining words were stifled by a gasp, then a cry of “*Lukin!*”

By the time Mikhail craned his neck to see, it was too late. In one second, Nikolai was watching them from the center of the intersection. In the next, he was being attacked from the one direction that was supposed to have been clear—right behind him. A reptile launched itself at him, its massive hand grabbing the Spetsnaz and slamming him head-first into the metal wall before the Russian could react. Talons found flesh, and Nikolai’s neck was torn open in a single, effortless slash. He fell lifelessly to the floor.

Releasing Mikhail, Nina raised her pistol and opened fire. The reptile was struck in the chest and neck several times before a bullet found its forehead. It collapsed to its knees then bent forward. A final blast knocked it on its back. Both it and Nikolai lay still, red and green blood mixing in a growing puddle around them.

Mikhail’s mouth hung disbelievingly. Where had the reptile come from? They’d dispatched every alien that direction, and any they hadn’t would have had to go through the Americans. Were the Americans defeated? Had the Soviets somehow missed one of these creatures? As Nina sprinted to the intersection, Mikhail pushed to his feet to follow.

The scene at Nikolai’s body was gruesome. The Spetsnaz’s throat had been ripped completely out—his vertebrae were in plain sight. Blood was spilling everywhere. Nina dropped to her knees, covering each of the intersections in turn. Mikhail slid down next to her, any pain he’d been feeling replaced by the sudden rush of urgency. Quickly and without discussion, the two remaining Soviets swapped weapons. M3 in both hands, Nina’s eyes darted across the corridors. “Where did it come from?” she asked frantically.

“I don’t know!” He glanced briefly at the alien. It hadn’t even fired at Nikolai. It had come straight up from behind him, as if it’d been right there all along. As if it’d just risen from thin air. How had it gotten the jump on a Spetsnaz GRU?

Something suddenly caught Mikhail’s eye. Something about the reptile—something chillingly familiar. Leaning closer, he focused on the alien’s face. Right into its eyes.

Into its eye.

One of the reptile’s eye sockets was completely empty. Healed over, but vacant. As a knot formed in the pit of Mikhail’s stomach, he looked

down the corridor toward the corner they'd turned long ago—the one he himself had cleared with a grenade. He looked for the alien he'd told them not to waste a bullet on. It was gone. "Oh my God," he whispered.

Nina was still pivoting in the other three directions. "What?" she asked breathily. "What is it?"

This was the reptile they'd left behind. The one Mikhail had thought was out of the fight. The wounds, the gashes, all were completely resealed. He could see the scar marks on its body, but the wounds themselves were closed. Raising his pistol quickly, Mikhail fired a series of bullets straight into the alien's forehead. The reptile's head rocked back and forth until its skull cracked open. Brain fluid hit his face then spilled onto the floor.

Nina, having jumped at the first of Mikhail's shots, spun to face him. "*What the hell are you doing?*"

Taking a defensive posture, Mikhail grabbed Nikolai's PPsh-41 and slid it Nina's way to take. "It regenerated! Like lizards regrowing their tails! This was the one we left behind." The one *he'd* told them to save bullets on. How many others had they left alive, even unknowingly? This one had been in terrible shape, yet there it was, the slayer of their Spetsnaz. How many other reptiles' deaths had they left to assumption?

For a moment, Nina's gaze was fixated on the alien's corpse, as if Mikhail's claim was too unreal to believe. Then she quickly grabbed the PPsh-41. She slung it over her shoulder. "All right," she said hurriedly, desperately. She knew the kind of trouble they were in. "What is the plan now?"

What *was* the plan? Besides this one reptile whose brains were on the floor and the others dispatched by the grenade, they didn't know if any of the ones they'd killed earlier were truly dead. The ones by the dig site were most certainly all alive.

"We could be in the middle of them all!" said Nina, her voice shaking harder. "Where are the Americans?" She scanned in the four hallway directions.

It didn't matter where the Americans were now. Getting to them was no sure thing, nor was there any guarantee that the Americans were even still alive. What if they'd been attacked from behind, too? Aliens rising from the dead would catch anyone off-guard, Green Beret or not.

Focus on what you need to do. Reach the bridge.

The bridge. Whether it was heavily defended or not, it was the one place where whatever plan they had could be put into action. If they were even going in the right direction to find the bridge. If there even was a

bridge at all. “We keep going forward,” Mikhail said. “We find the bridge, we shut down their communication.”

“What if you are wrong?” she asked. Wiping her hairline back, her eyes stayed on the corridor. “What if they have no communication plan? What if this is all something that just came to your head?” Her pretense of subordination was gone—there was no one to maintain the act for. It was just the two of them.

As for him being wrong, he couldn’t accept that. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe it was a possibility. He just refused to be directionless. “I cannot believe that vision meant nothing.”

“Do you realize we are going to die if we go any further?”

It was that question, of all that’d been posed since the mission began, that finally hit him. It wasn’t even a question; it was a declaration. They were going to die if they went further. There was no doubt in Nina’s mind.

Memories resurfaced in Mikhail’s own head—real memories. His memories. Kseniya resurfaced.

His day had started with her. When he woke up, she was the first person to greet him. To smile at him. What if he did die here? He may never see her smile again. Kseniya’s voice repeated in his mind, words and phrases she’d spoken to him that very morning.

“I want to be a soldier. So I can fight the Americans! I want to be like you!”

There was so much innocence in Kseniya, even in the way she spoke of such things as war. Such a lack of realization as to what war was. What war was about. What *was* it about?

It was about freedom.

In that moment, there was a shift inside him. It was subtle, happening deep in Mikhail’s heart, but it was there. He’d never asked for this mission. He’d never hoped for anything like it. But here he was. Here he was, facing what was increasingly looking like certain death, in the best possible position of any human being on the planet...to save everyone. To save her.

If that vision was more than just a “vision.” If the aliens truly were trying to fix their communication. If this ship was in fact about to turn into a beacon. If this was the catalyst for an invasion. If all or any of those things were true.

Then Kseniya would be in the middle of it.

The bridge. Everything hinged on the bridge. Right then, Mikhail knew how to answer Nina’s question—the one she’d intended to be rhetorical. The inquiry as to whether or not he realized they were going to die if they went further.

“Yes,” he said to her. “Yes, I do.”

Nina’s gaze settled on his face. For several moments, even with the potential for chaos all around them, she stood still and silent. She was realizing where he stood. Did she stand there, too?

Reaffirming her grip on the M3, Nina turned to cover their rear. “We must move quickly.”

Closing his eyes, Mikhail whispered a *thank you* to whatever God was listening. He’d have finished this mission by himself if he’d had to, but Nina’s help would undoubtedly make it easier. “Do you have a family, Nina?”

Her expression changed somewhat as he addressed her by her first name, though it quickly passed. “No. Do you?”

“I have a daughter. She is six. Her name is Kseniya.” Seconds were precious—but these were worth it. He wanted Nina to know his motivation, in case there was any doubt.

The sniper nodded. “Let’s do this for your daughter, Mikhail.”

Save your daughter. Disable communications. That was precisely what Mikhail intended to do.

Weapons raised and ready, they forged ahead.

5

1549 hours

THE CORRIDOR THAT led to the forward section of the spacecraft was angled upward, a result of the tilt of the ship. The pain that surged throughout Mikhail's shoulder couldn't be ignored—it could only be tolerated. With Nina at his side and both operatives making frequent glances behind them, the pair progressed up the ascension.

There was no turn to be seen ahead; the corridor simply ended at a metal door similar to those they'd passed along the way. Mikhail was fairly certain by that point that opening the door would not be an issue. It was what lay *behind* the door that was his concern. He needed it to be the bridge. It *had* to be. He was confident that it was. This felt like the right way to go, almost to a familiar degree. The feeling grew stronger with every step he took.

His palms were sweaty around the grip of his pistol, even though no hostiles were jumping out to challenge them. With droplets of sweat rolling down his temples, he glanced back briefly to survey the intersection they'd been walking away from. No aliens were there. He focused ahead.

As they drew to within ten meters of the door, Mikhail picked up his pace, trotting to the door until he was able to press his body against the wall beside it. Mirroring him, Nina's focus shifted back to the corridor behind them. Eyeing the control panel, Mikhail placed his hand over the door mechanism. His gaze shifted to Nina, who briefly looked his way. There was no need for words—their expressions said everything. This was it. If Mikhail was right, the bridge lay on the other side of that door along with whatever forces were prepared to defend it.

Silently, Mikhail mouthed his countdown. "Three." Nina wiped her hair back, gaze locked on him. "Two." Mikhail's heart rate intensified. His senses kicked in fully. It was time. Inhaling to say the inevitable, his hand pressed against the panel. "One."

The mechanism was activated. The door slid into the wall. Simultaneously, Mikhail and Nina rushed into the room, weapons raised

and ready to fire.

The moment they stepped inside, there was no doubt that this was the bridge. It was spacious—control panels were everywhere. Technology beyond their comprehension. Noise and light that had travelled across the stars. It was the heart of a technological behemoth.

Rushing into the room's center, they spun in every direction to locate targets. There was only stillness. There were no living aliens—gray or otherwise—anywhere. Several corpses could be seen scattered across the floor, likely victims of the crash. The culmination of that crash, the American front outside, and his strike team must have dwindled the aliens' numbers to the point where critical areas, such as the bridge, could no longer be defended. That was all Mikhail could surmise.

Alien hieroglyphics were everywhere, none of which seemed at all familiar to Mikhail, even with his echoed alien memories. "It is here. It must be." Pointing to the door they'd entered through, Mikhail said, "Cover the exit." Nina acknowledged and moved into a fortifying position, her M3 aimed down the corridor as she covered inside the door.

None of the panels anywhere near Mikhail looked familiar. *Look across the room.* Mikhail's gaze shifted to a panel on the far side of the bridge. Immediately, familiarity clicked.

Gunfire erupted, yanking Mikhail away from his thoughts. Raising his Makarov, he took cover and watched as the door on the opposite side of Nina's whisked open. All at once, Hemingway, Reed, and Sparks backed inside, each man firing his weapon ferociously. It was a desperate retreat. Within seconds, it became apparent as to why.

A guardian marched into the room, weapon blazing, as the three Americans dove for cover in different directions. The armored robot was identical to the one Mikhail had and his team had encountered—and it was right in the midst of them. As the guardian launched a volley, the Green Berets leapt over railings and dove behind consoles. Whipping his head to Nina, Mikhail instructed her to hold her position. Then he fumbled for his alien rifle.

A blast erupted across the room. Reed tumbled over a console. The soldier had been struck.

Mikhail knew he had no chance to fire his alien weapon accurately—not in the shape he was in. Earlier he'd had the benefit of perfect positioning and a wall to support his dead arm. The way he was now, the kickback alone would knock him off his feet. He had to get his weapon to Hemingway. "Captain!" As soon as Mikhail cried out Hemingway's rank, he flung the

alien rifle in the American's direction. Hemingway watched it as it rattled toward him and dove to claim it.

"How the hell do you fire it?" Hemingway demanded. The guardian set its sights on Sparks.

Mikhail was seeking his own cover now. Hands over his head, he screamed, "Use the...thing! The..." What was the right word for the firing mechanism? "The toggle! Put your hand on the toggle!"

Rising up from behind the console, Hemingway lifted the alien rifle against his shoulder. A bolt of blue energy exploded from its barrel, careening off to the side and madly off-target. A wall console shattered in a spray of sparks.

The guardian fired on, its relentless march taking it straight toward Sparks. The soldier grunted as an energy bolt connected squarely with his stomach. Bursting open, his body toppled.

From his position behind the guardian, Hemingway fired again. This time, his aim was true. A metallic groan emerged from the guardian as it stuttered forward, struck by its own technology. Before it could turn to face its human assailant, it was struck a second time. Smoke bellowed from its innards as it teetered backward like a falling tree. Crashing against an island console, it slid motionless to the floor. All was still.

Humming, almost pulsing, the consoles around Mikhail provided the only commentary to the final rush of the extraterrestrials—or what Mikhail hoped was the final rush. There wasn't much more they could handle. Sparks was likely dead. Reed was injured enough to have not participated in the climax of the fight. Mikhail himself was essentially down to one arm. They were all battered. But not beaten.

Pushing up gingerly and wiping blood from his mouth where he'd nicked himself on a console, Mikhail scanned the bridge. Across the way, Hemingway was abandoning the awkward alien rifle for his submachine gun. Nina was darting between the debris toward Reed and Sparks.

"Captain Hemingway," Nina said, looking across at the American. She was assisting a wincing Reed to his feet. "Sparks is dead."

Hemingway said nothing in response; for the first time, the Green Beret leader looked genuinely tired. His focus shifted to Mikhail. "Do you think that communication relay is here?"

"Yes," Mikhail answered painfully, the agony of his shoulder wound returning in full force. Limping across the room, he approached the console he'd recognized from before. "It's this one."

Propping Reed against the wall, Nina collapsed beside him. The female

sniper was spent.

“We never ran across any other aliens,” Hemingway said. “Just that metal thing.” Looking at Mikhail in puzzlement, Hemingway approached him from behind. “You *sure* that’s the panel?”

He had no doubts. “This is the one.”

“How do you...?” Hemingway’s question trailed off as Mikhail reached for the console. He watched the Soviet captain begin to work.

In a way Mikhail couldn’t explain, everything about the console looked familiar. The hieroglyphs, the buttons, even the position his hands needed to be in to work the controls. It was as if his body was possessed.

Mikhail’s fingers flew from one end of the console to the other with lightning-quick efficiency. There were several displays on its surface, each flashing sequences of code that changed with every glyph Mikhail tapped. Chirps, beeps, mechanized alien voices. His hands were conducting an orchestra he couldn’t comprehend.

Even as his fingers darted from one end of the display to the next, the thought emerged in his head: how could this be? He didn’t remember any of this from the gray’s memories, yet he was operating this console as if he’d operated it his whole life. The panel shifted again, a blue triangle in the upper corner morphing into a red circle. The lines of code faded, replaced by a row of hieroglyphs.

Mikhail’s eyes darted to one of the overhead displays. The power conduits were rerouted. All remaining energy was now transferred to the core. The overload sequence was ready to engage. Hand gripping a lever at the top corner of the console, he pressed it forward until it clicked into place. It was almost done.

Then he stopped.

Ever so slowly, he looked at the overhead display again—the one he’d just interpreted as a core overload. Except now, he was interpreting it differently. Now he was interpreting that all remaining energy had been transferred away from the communication relays, not *to* the core. Overload sequence? No, this was a communication shutdown. It was all clear again—everything he was doing. Why had he discerned it in a totally different way mere seconds before? It was as if his mind had corrected some sort of error in perception. Overload sequence...overload sequence...where had that even *come* from? Hands easing away from the console, Mikhail took a step back.

Power conduits transferred to the core. Not away from communications. To the core.

A series of visuals flashed through his mind. Kseniya screaming. More spacecraft were landing; they were invading Zossen. Storming into Mikhail's home. Kseniya's body erupted as their energy weapons tore through her. The images faded; the console was in front of him again. In the midst of Mikhail's silence, his mission—as direct as it had been since the moment it first came to him—resurfaced.

Return to the console. Shut down communications. Save his daughter. It was a simple task; his only task. Nothing else mattered. Not heeding Colonel Dorokhov's original orders, not defeating capitalism. There was but room in his mind for one thing and one thing alone. There was only room for...

...there was only room for...

What am I doing?

Brow arched, he looked up at the display again. The depiction no longer registered as a communication shutdown, nor as a core overload. It was now completely undecipherable—a language he'd never seen before. Sweat poured down his forehead as he stepped back. *What the hell is going on?*

Deep within his consciousness, something roared. A scream of pain. Mikhail felt a wave of agony that was not his own.

Standing from the floor, Nina looked at him strangely. "Mikhail?" Behind Mikhail, Hemingway cocked his head.

With every second, the throbbing grew worse. The roar became louder. Pain struck him, as if knives had been thrust into his cerebral cortex. Mikhail doubled over forward, only his palms stopping him from hitting the floor face-first. Claspings the sides of his head, he screamed.

He felt a mental curtain fall; he perceived a presence he'd never been aware of until then. Separate from himself. His head pulsed, it pounded. The presence was grasping at him, fighting for him. But it was losing. Mikhail's vocal chords unleashed a screech the likes of which had never escaped him before. It sounded inhuman, and for a moment—the faintest of moments—he felt the other presence's mind.

It was wounded. Crawling. It was trying to escape. The presence had never been prompting Mikhail to disable communications; communications had never been lost. It was trying to get Mikhail to blow up the ship.

Suddenly, Mikhail was forced out, the fallen curtain replaced by a solid wall. He felt a tangible release. It was gone.

Nina and Hemingway were gathered around him as he struggled to stand, just as they'd been when it'd first touched his mind. Back when

Mikhail thought it was a gray's dying memory. Their voices emerged again.

"Mikhail!" Nina said. "Quick, lean him against the—"

She never had a chance to finish her sentence. Grabbing Nina by the back of the head, Hemingway slammed her face-first into the wall console. In the next second, Mikhail himself was grabbed by the American captain and flung across the room, where he crashed against the wall.

Reed clambered to his feet in alarm. "*Captain?*"

Without a second's hesitation, Hemingway aimed his M3 at Reed's face and pulled the trigger. The back of Reed's head burst open. He fell lifelessly to the floor.

The bridge went still.

Hemingway's eyes focused on the console Mikhail had left behind. Approaching it, his fingers began working the various inputs on its surface.

Mikhail's vision was spinning—a combination of mental trauma and the attack from Hemingway. *What is going on?* Groggily, he placed his hands on the floor and attempted to push himself up. Blood trickled from his nose and ears. He felt faint.

The silence died as a resonating pulse emerged from every direction. Along the ceiling and walls, red lights pulsed with an almost organic rhythm. Every active monitor in the room flashed, their former screens replaced by red alien glyphs.

Hemingway...what did he just do? Rolling over awkwardly, Mikhail stared across the room at the American captain. Hemingway was standing over the console, staring down as if in some sort of trance. Then, ever so slowly, he turned his head to Mikhail. Raising his M3, the American marched toward him.

Panic struck Mikhail. "Captain..." Quickly, he reached for his own weapon, only to realize that it had fallen from his shoulder. It lay directly between him and the ever-approaching Hemingway. There was no way Mikhail could get it in time.

The look in Hemingway's eyes was devoid of emotion. He looked like a zombie. Submachine gun in position to fire, he stopped within several meters of Mikhail. His dead stare locked onto his Russian counterpart.

It has control of him. The same presence that had control of me. Mikhail had merely been influenced. This was far beyond that. Before he'd ever set foot in Iceland, Mikhail had been warned about American treachery. Now he was facing it in a way he'd never expected. "Do not do this! It is not you!"

The shot rang out; blood splattered Mikhail's face. But nothing had

struck him. No bullet, no pain. By the time he looked back up, Hemingway was already falling. The captain thudded against the floor face-first. Behind him, her Makarov raised, was Nina. For several seconds the sniper remained frozen, her wide eyes locked with Mikhail from across the room. Then slowly, her shoulders released. Nina slumped back against the wall, exhausted but alive.

Mikhail's reaction couldn't have been more different. Growling in pain as he shoved up to his feet, he stumbled past the crumpled body of Hemingway to the console. The feverish pace of the act prompted Nina to sit up and take notice.

Mikhail scrutinized the display once more, the glyphs on its surface morphing and changing at a pace too fast to keep up with, flipping and spinning and shifting. Occasionally disappearing, like numbers in a countdown. Numbers in a countdown.

Hemingway had done it.

"Captain?" asked Nina exhaustedly, rising to shuffle toward him.

Looking around, Mikhail studied the other monitors in the room. What he saw was impossible to misinterpret. Red symbols in the shape of the alien spacecraft, set to loop with the same animation every few seconds. An explosion. The sense of urgency struck Mikhail immediately.

We need to get out of here. Down the corridors. Out of the entry hole. Across the mud field. With a ship this size, how big would the explosion be? They were standing in the heart of the whole thing. Even if the countdown was twenty minutes long, it might not be enough time to get out of range. *I can't stop the countdown—I can't even recognize the controls. What is my plan?* Between the lights, the sounds, and the chaos of the situation itself, the environment was anything but conducive to thinking clearly. Mikhail had never needed clarity more.

Nina repeated breathlessly, "Captain, what is going on?"

"This ship is self-destructing."

Her jaw dropped. "What?"

"There was no communication from the gray alien, there was no life flashing before my eyes," Mikhail said. "I was under the influence of an alien presence. It made me think I had received privileged information that would help us defeat it. It made me think I had gained an advantage when in reality, it was influencing me to help it." Stepping to the room's center, he surveyed all the other monitors, each one flashing in its own way, revealing alien hieroglyphs he couldn't read. "When I figured out what was going on, it released it me and took Hemingway instead."

Shaking her head perplexingly, Nina said, “Why would...why would it make you blow up the ship?”

“I don’t know! Maybe it realized it had lost. Maybe it needed something else to do the job.” They hadn’t run across a single reptile after their experience with the gray alien, other than the one-eyed reptile that’d regenerated. Everything else had been a robot. Maybe the presence, whatever it was, could only control organics. Humans would have been its only option. Running a hand through his hair, Mikhail racked his brain for a solution. The only moments of truth he’d received from the presence were the brief glimpses of its intentions just before their connection broke. Could anything be drawn from that? *Escape. It was trying to escape.* If that was true, that meant there was a way off the spacecraft.

“Is there anything flashing on any of these screens to indicate directions?” Mikhail asked. “A place to go for a ship that is about to explode, some means of ejection?”

Nina scoured the displays. The image of the ship exploding was everywhere. There were red lights flashing, but none of them seemed indicative of any instruction or guidance.

“*Come on,*” Mikhail murmured under his breath. “How are you getting out of this, you alien son of a whore?” He had no idea what the entity’s means of escape was, but that didn’t matter. What mattered was that among the few options he and Nina had remaining, this was the only one that bore any potential to be life-saving. A glance at the hieroglyphic countdown revealed that a quarter of the symbols were already gone. They were running out of time. “We could look here for ten minutes and not find a clue. Come, we must leave now. We will find the escape route on our own.”

Touching his good arm, Nina said, “Mikhail, if you are right, would not every alien on this ship be going to the same place?”

“If I am right,” he said, “there are no other aliens left.” That presence needed a human for a reason. Kneeling down next to Hemingway, Mikhail felt the American captain for a pulse. There was none. Nina had shot him straight through the heart. If she was taken over by that entity, the next heart to receive a bullet would be his. Glancing back to her as she reloaded her submachine gun, he offered the obligatory warning. “Nina, if you feel a presence in your mind, resist it. Both our lives depend on it.”

“I will, captain.”

Mikhail nodded. “Let’s go.” Reclaiming the alien rifle—the only weapon that seemed effective against the guardians—he led Nina out

of the bridge.

Much like the bridge, the corridors of the spacecraft were aglow with red flashing lights. The pulse, unrelenting in its consistency, resonated on as the pair tracked down the hall. At the direction they were traveling, they were following the ship's downward tilt. Mikhail had opted to exit the bridge through the door Hemingway and his team had entered through; he'd been everywhere else and seen no signs of an escape method.

Where was that thing escaping to? The brief connection he'd shared with the entity had only served to inform him of the alien's state and intentions. He hadn't been able to determine anything concrete, such as where the being was or where it was headed. He had an inkling that either the center or the rear of the vessel held the answer, if only for the fact that they hadn't come across anything resembling a means of escape in the forward section. Assuming the ship's interior was symmetrical—an assumption that could have easily been wrong—there'd be nothing in the opposite wing to the one they'd first entered. He was being led by educated guesses. It was better than being led by an alien presence.

The pain in Mikhail's shoulder was nearly unbearable. Though he still maintained the functionality of both arms, the last thing he wanted to do was have to fire that alien weapon again. Stopping at the first intersection he and Nina came across, he scanned all four directions. Nikolai's lifeless body lay sprawled further down one of the corridors. In fact, the very room Mikhail had scrambled into to escape the first guardian could be seen, only several doors down. It all confirmed his symmetrical theory.

Continuing forward, he left the intersection behind him, traveling deeper into the vessel. This was the same route Hemingway had taken after they'd split into two teams, except Mikhail was moving in the opposite direction. Doors lined both sides of the hall. *The escape route could be in any of these—how can we check them all with such little time?* Moving to the first in a long row of doors, Mikhail opened it. Human-sized tubes were lined up across its far wall, some sort of liquid churning within. *Fascinating, but not a means of escape.* Onto the next. "Check the doors on the other side, quickly!" Nina affirmed, and they began working their way down.

One room after the other, one glance within after another, yet nothing helpful was discovered. Supply rooms followed rooms with corpses strewn about from the crash, which followed rooms with no discernible purpose. Still, there was nothing that resembled a means to escape.

Mikhail's heart rate increased with each pulse of the spacecraft's alarm. The countdown ticker had been down a quarter when they'd left the bridge. It had to be past the halfway point now. "Come on!" he shouted, slamming his palm against a metallic door frame as yet another fruitless room revealed itself. Nina echoed similar frustration.

Reaching another intersection, Mikhail found himself having to choose between two directions. Off toward the ship's starboard, or angled back toward the aft section. Without hesitation, he bolted toward the aft section, Nina hot on his heels. It took barely ten steps before he found something, unmistakable even amid the pulsing red warning lights. It was exactly the kind of clue he was hoping to find.

A blood trail. Thin, purple blood. Not human.

"Mikhail, look," Nina said, pointing to the trail in the same moment he saw it.

Look, indeed. The trail led from one of the side doors straight down the hall toward the back of the ship. The entity had been injured—that much Mikhail had sensed already. It was crawling toward its escape. That this trail looked suspiciously like something crawling on the floor had to be more than coincidence. "Let's go," he said, sprinting down the corridor.

The blood trail continued down the center of the hall until finally turning inside a room with an opened door. More than ever, Mikhail was positive this was where they needed to go. His legs moved faster. "It is in there!" He knew it. "Be ready for—"

Anything.

Skidding to a halt a few meters from their destination, Mikhail and Nina's stares locked onto the door's opening. Bright, rotating white lights flashed from within the room. A low rumble emanated into the halls. It lasted several seconds before the red pulsing of the warning lights once again became the only illumination.

What was that? His pace picking up and his alien rifle awkwardly lifted to his shoulder, Mikhail reached the open door at a full-on sprint. Whirling into the room, he scanned it for a target. There was none to be found.

Inside the room was a row of metallic capsules, their fronts opened like segmented doorways, their interiors hollow except for a feature that was completely recognizable. Seats. Each capsule had one—a pristine, white, seemingly cushioned seat. Designed for something similar to, but not quite, human. Above each capsule was a large, circular opening.

Following the blood trail, Mikhail realized it led straight to where one of the capsules surely would have stood, but was now missing. *It*

escaped. His focus shifted to Nina and himself. “Get in one of those capsules, quickly!”

Nina rushed toward the nearest one, abandoning her weapons as she leapt into the seat. Placing her arms on the armrests, she looked in every direction. Nothing happened. Eyes panicked, she turned to Mikhail. “What do we do?”

Hands on his head, Mikhail hurried to Nina’s capsule. There were controls within, but nothing looked familiar. How were these things activated? “Is there a button? A lever, something obvious?”

Nina’s hands raced, hitting every button and pressing in every indentation within reach. Again, nothing. Finally, her eyes came to rest on a single button separated from the rest—right along the inner wall of the capsule. The moment she slammed it in, the capsule came to life. The walls shifted and slid, prompting Mikhail to leap back to avoid being sliced in two. Within seconds, Nina was contained in a perfect metallic sphere. The only features on its surface were a transparent slit through which the sniper was peering out, and a ring around the middle of the sphere, complete with glowing lights. Slowly, the ring began to spin.

It was exactly what they had seen from the hallway—they must have only been moments behind the escaping being. Now knowing what to do, Mikhail needed only to claim a capsule for himself. Whatever these capsules were and wherever they were going, it was better than where they were now. With Nina taken care of, Mikhail offered the sniper a thumbs up from outside the window.

Suddenly, Nina’s eyes widened. Banging on the window, she shouted at the top of her lungs, pointing for Mikhail to turn around. The moment he did, he saw why she was screaming.

It was a guardian. The massive green robot was lumbering around the door, red rifle in hand. The moment Mikhail came into view, it raised its weapon and fired.

Mikhail was already in mid-leap. Landing sideways on his shoulder, he yowled as the guardian stepped toward him. Behind them both, Nina’s capsule soared upward through the hole in the ceiling. But Mikhail didn’t have time to care. Rolling along the floor to avoid another blast, he righted himself against the wall and raised his own alien weapon. The guardian and he fired simultaneously.

A searing pain struck Mikhail. It hit harder than the shot to his shoulder—burned more than the time he’d broken his leg jumping from the roof of his house as a teenager. The robot’s weapon had struck him

on the left side of his hip; he could feel the middle of his torso burning. Through screams of torment, he fired at the robot again. His first shot had struck the guardian, knocking it backward. The second finished the job. The robot crashed against the floor with a metallic thud. Mikhail dropped his weapon, leaned his head back, and screamed at the top of his lungs.

Burning. Everything was burning. His thigh, his abdomen. He couldn't bring himself to look. The smell of melting skin was indicative enough.

Get to one of the capsules! Eyes blinded by tears, Mikhail fought to pull himself toward the closest capsule. The first time he put any weight on his damaged shoulder, he collapsed with a yell.

The red lights continued to flash—the pulse was ceaseless. Once again, Mikhail focused on the capsule. Whimpering, he clawed at the floor with his good arm. Slowly, he dragged himself forward for almost a foot. Then pain struck again, and again, his arms gave way.

He was in the same position as the creature that had invaded his mind—crawling desperately toward his escape pod, trailing blood. This was why it couldn't set the self-destruct sequence itself. It would have never made it from the bridge to the capsule in time.

Again, Mikhail pulled himself forward. Again, Mikhail screamed, and again, his body failed him. He wasn't even a quarter of the way across the room. He may as well have had a kilometer to go. He realized he was going to die.

You have eight apples. If you divide them equally into two, how many apples does each side have?

His body offered a final attempt at movement, accompanied by a final shutdown of his muscles. He had nothing left. His fingernails scraped against the floor, resulting in no progress despite the effort. But he exerted the effort.

Can I go play in my room?

No. You are supposed to be sick today. An obviously exaggerated claim.

There were four apples. She was smart enough to know. She just needed to try.

The floor vibrated. A low rumble emerged through the halls. The core was overloading. Reaching forward, Mikhail strained to move again. But his consciousness was already fading.

She was so beautiful. The first time he'd held her, he was in love. It grew stronger every day.

Mikhail's body went limp. He laid his forehead on the floor. The overload began.

Papa loves you, Kseniya. He loves you so much. Hand trembling, he reached shakily into his pocket to pull out his wallet. He kept a photo of her there. He wanted to see his daughter one more time. See those brown eyes and that smile one more time.

But there wasn't enough time.

The detonation vaporized the spacecraft and extinguished all life within a five-mile radius. The rocky lowlands offered the troops outside no cover against the blast, and even if it had, there'd have been no time to reach them. The shockwave was simply too fast. In a span of five seconds, thousands of men perished.

Captain Mikhail Kirov was the first.

* * *

NINA'S HEART POUNDED. The curvature of the Earth grew more and more defined with each passing second, the darkness of space looming above the capsule as it rocketed skyward. Despite its breakneck speed of ascent, no effects of g-force or inertia could be felt within.

Pushing back her hair, Nina looked frantically in every direction. Buttons flickered and flashed, displays with hieroglyphs shifted and scrolled. It was overwhelming.

Blue gave way to black, and the hue of the planet Earth dimmed beneath the brightness of the Milky Way. Then, as suddenly as the capsule had accelerated, it stopped.

Weightlessness ensued as Nina lifted off the surface of the chair. Each strand of her hair took on a life of its own, swaying from side to side as if she was floating underwater. Eyes widening and heart calming for the first time since the ascent, Nina stared out of the window.

Stars. Brighter than she'd ever seen them from her world below. Purple ribbons stretched across the expanse of deep space, the arms of the galaxy vibrant and limitless. Amid the blackness, there was sheer beauty. Sheer beauty.

Nina was breathless.

Something jetted out of the console directly beneath her—some type of instrument attached to a metal stalk. Starting back, she shrieked as it hovered in front of her face. There was a whir. The instrument head pivoted up and down her body, a flicker of red light pulsing as if she was being scanned. The instrument stopped. Its head rose back to her. Silence.

Suddenly, an unearthly thumping noise, even louder than the pulse

in the crashed spacecraft, wailed inside the capsule. The instrument retracted—the stalk was sucked back into its housing. With a lurch, the capsule plummeted back toward the atmosphere. Sweat fell from Nina's brow; hyperventilation hit her. Faster and faster, she zoomed straight down.

Only when it had fallen all the way back to the crash site did the capsule slam to a dead stop, momentum nonexistent within its spherical housing. The capsule tilted forward until Nina fell out of the chair and tumbled against the glass, staring straight down at the massive crater where the spacecraft had once stood. Once again, its surface opened.

Nina was released several meters above the ground. Gone was the mire that had existed there earlier, the mud blown away by the explosion of the alien spacecraft. What met Nina was glassed rock and uprooted earth. No amount of knee-bending could break the impact. As she slammed into the surface, her legs snapped at the shins. She wailed in tortuous agony. Above her, the capsule closed, righted itself, and shot into the sky.

Only the rain provided a sense of motion to the desolate wasteland that had once been the landscape of Kirkjubæjarklaustur. There were no troops moving. There were no vehicles. There was nothing. The crater stretched beyond the original width of the spacecraft, reaching to the very hills that Nina, Mikhail, and the strike team had initially trekked down. It was as if the Apocalypse had rained down upon the tip of southern Iceland.

Moaning hoarsely, Nina rolled her neck to the side to shield half of her face from the rain. Her legs were twisted across the rocks, the blood from her compound fractures staining the pools of water around her. Jaw trembling, she went numb. The subtle motion of her breathing was the only indication that she was alive. But she was alive.

In the hours that followed, American and Soviet forces converged on the crater. They found no traces of the spacecraft that had once been there, nor of the reptiles that had so staunchly held off the American offensive. They found no evidence of the alien presence at all. But they did find a woman, exhausted and soaked to the core, sprawled out in the crater. A woman who was never supposed to have been there at all.

Nina Andrianova was carried away from the scene, placed on a gurney, and taken to a military hospital in the heart of Kirkjubæjarklaustur. Despite the size of the explosion, the hospital was virtually empty.

There was no one else to treat.

6

**Friday, April 25rd, 1958
1800 hours**

Two days later

“NINA.”

Slinging her sniper rifle from her shoulder, Nina waited for the now-drenched Kirov to approach her. “Nina Andrianova, captain,” she said. “I apologize for not being at my post.”

“Nina?”

Kirov leapt back as soon as he picked up the flashlight. Steadying herself on the mud-slicked floor, Nina followed the captain’s gaze—right to the alien face. Her heart nearly stopped.

The man clapped his hands loudly. “Nina!”

Nina’s eyes jolted opened. “Behind you!” she shouted. Then she went still.

She wasn’t on a ship. There were no aliens around her. Everything was quiet. Her gaze focused on the bald-headed man looking down at her, who glanced briefly behind him to see if anything was there. Nothing was. Laying her head back, Nina’s heart settled.

The man, middle-aged and wearing a white lab coat, looked back at her. “Everything all right?” He was American.

Closing her eyes, she nodded her head. She was in a hospital bed, not a spacecraft. No weapons were firing, no aliens attacking. She was safe. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Can you tell me your name and date of birth, please?”

It was standard medical questioning. “Nina Yustina Andrianova. Umm.” The man, whom she could only presume was a doctor, patiently raised an eyebrow. “August 14th, 1922.”

Leaning closer, the man studied her. “And what’s the last thing you

remember?”

Eyes narrowing, she thought back. They'd entered the spaceship through the hole started by the dig team. But the dig team was dead. What happened inside the ship? “I remember...” Extraterrestrials. They were fighting extraterrestrials. Reptiles. But what else? “. . .we split up, into two teams. The Soviets and Americans.” Forehead wrinkling, she tried to think harder. But nothing else came.

“When you woke up, you said, ‘Behind you.’ Does that mean something?”

“Behind you,” she repeated quietly. Why had she shouted that? When she moved her arm to touch her forehead in thought, the man quickly stopped her.

“No, no, no. . .just lay still.”

Again, Nina whispered, “Behind you.” She had no idea why she'd said that. She barely even remembered shouting it, even though it was scarcely a minute earlier. Rolling her head to the side, she opened her mouth to begin saying, “I don't know,” but stopped as soon as she saw her surroundings. This wasn't a hospital. It was a tent. A massive, barren, white tent. The bed and medical equipment around her were the only things present at all. She moved to sit upward.

Once again, the doctor stopped her. “Don't. You need to lay still.”

“Where the hell am I? Why can't I feel my legs?”

“You were injured in the explosion. Your legs have been numbed.”

Her eyes widened. “The *explosion*?” Memories flashed through her mind.

She and Mikhail charged into the bridge on the three-count. Weapons raised, they immediately searched for targets. None were there.

All of a sudden, Hemingway grabbed her. He slammed her head against the console. She toppled over as everything spun.

Mikhail didn't see the robotic guardian coming—he was too busy looking at her, making sure she was secured in the capsule. Beating on the glass slit, she screamed.

“Behind you!” She blurted the words out again. The bald-headed man flinched. “Mikhail! Where is Mikhail?” Nina lurched up—then she saw them. Her legs. They were gone below her knees. “*Oh my God!*”

The man grabbed her again. “Miss Andrianova, please, lay still!” Her eyes were panicked, her breathing relentless. She was hyperventilating. Looking off to the right, the man screamed, “I could use a little help, here!” Immediately, two large soldiers emerged from a slit in the tent wall.

They sprinted toward the bed, grabbing Nina as soon as they reached her. As they forcibly held her down, the bald-headed man injected her in the neck with a needle. Seconds later, Nina's squirming stopped. Eyes rolling back, she went motionless.

Jaw setting, the man took a step back. "Let it be known that at 1802 hours, the subject had to be sedated. We'll try again in twelve hours." The two soldiers nodded.

From a speaker situated in the corner, a garbled voice emerged. "Six hours."

"She won't be awake in six hours!" Sighing, the man rubbed his head. "And give me some *damn* straps next time!" When the voice didn't reply, the man looked at one of the soldiers. "This is your post for the next twelve hours. If at any point she wakes up, let me know immediately. She shouldn't, but...you know."

"Yes, sir."

He nodded at the other soldier. "Let's go. Palmerston's turn again."

Away from the room but observing through a small black-and-white monitor, a goateed man sat back in his chair. Picking up a pencil, he scribbled something on a notepad.

"You heard the way she said that," a thick Russian-accented man said behind him. "She remembered something."

"Yeah, well," answered the man in the chair, an American. "We don't know that."

Leaning against a desk, the Russian nodded. "I'm telling you. That was realization."

"The realization that she doesn't have feet."

"Give her time."

Slowly, the American's stare drifted to another monitor sitting further away. In the center of its display, hands clasped on his lap in a solid white room, Thomas Palmerston sat idly. "That thing he said they saw. That had to be her. Except they saw it happen twice."

The Russian pointed at Nina's monitor. "The way she asked where Kirov was. She was expecting him to be alive. She didn't ask about anyone else."

"Think he was in the other one?"

"If he was, where did he go?"

Shaking his head, the American signed. "We'll find out soon enough. Or we won't." In the other monitor, Palmerston looked across the white room. Seconds later, the same man who'd spoken to Nina appeared next

to him. “His story hasn’t changed in forty-eight hours. If we don’t get anything else from him today, I’m gonna recommend we send him home.” Rising from his chair, the American turned to the exit.

The Russian raised an eyebrow. “Do you think that is safe?”

“Oh yeah,” answered the American with a nod, “it’s safe.” Walking through the exit, he stopped briefly to glance back at his counterpart. “He loves his wife and kids.” Without any more words—only the exchange of an understanding nod—the American left the room.

* * *

Ten hours passed before Nina’s eyes cracked open again. As the haziness faded, she was able to make out the form of a man sitting several meters away in a chair, his attention focused on what looked like a newspaper. He was unaware of her, at least for the moment. Closing her eyes to keep her consciousness a secret, she waited for her mind to find clarity. It didn’t take long.

She remembered everything. The bridge of the spacecraft, the self-destruct sequence. Shooting Hemingway from behind. The mad dash with Mikhail to the escape capsules. Seeing the guardian attack him from behind, then her capsule soaring into space.

Though she didn’t know *where* she was, she knew *why* she was there. She knew why the bald-headed man was asking her questions. She knew why she wasn’t in a regular hospital. She was the sole survivor of a mission that never officially happened. If there were any answers to be found out about what took place inside the spacecraft, only she could provide them. Only she knew the truth about the strike team’s fate. About the trek through the downpour and the ambush of the dig team. About the aliens and weaponry they’d faced. About the unveiling of Nikolai Lukin and the courage of Sevastian Tyannikov, and about Hemingway and his honorable Green Berets. About the man who’d led them, trusting every one of them to do their jobs while doing his better than any of them. Whose six-year old daughter would never see him again.

For almost an hour, Nina laid in stillness, her eyes closed to ensure the obliviousness of her watcher. Inside, where the guards couldn’t reach, Nina made plans. Her life would never be the same—a fact that went well beyond her physical impediments. The bald man’s questions would only be the beginning. She had answers the world needed to know.

When Nina opened her eyes again, she did so with confidence and

determination. Confidence that she could provide whatever information was necessary. Determination that she'd overcome not only the questions, but the recovery. Gaze fixing on the guard in the chair, she said simply, "I am awake."

The guard almost dropped his newspaper. Shooting up, he looked toward the far end of the room and made a series of hand gestures. Within seconds, new footsteps entered the tent.

So it began.

The official story of what became known as the "Iceland Incident" emerged in the following days. It was that of an aborted Soviet invasion of the island, thwarted by the small-scale deployment of NATO nuclear weapons. The battle had been costly to both sides but of little gain to either; despite calls for escalation of the conflict, saner heads prevailed. It was announced that Iceland was to be administrated jointly by both superpowers and that a clean-up operation at the blast zone would begin at once.

In reality, a massive operation was underway at the crash site to scour the entire area of any remnant of extraterrestrial technology. Clandestine meetings were held at the highest levels of military and civilian administration, laying the foundations for a secretive new organization that would protect humanity if the extraterrestrials returned.

For most, the events of April 23rd 1958 were the terrifying culmination of the political tensions between two nuclear-armed superpowers and a welcome justification for a thaw in their relations. But for a select few, they were something far more significant: the knowledge that there was intelligent life beyond our planet—a hostile force against which humanity needed protection.

For the next two months of her life, Nina Andrianova lived within the confines of the facility she'd woken up in, answering questions, undergoing hypnosis-induced recollections, and discussing the events of Kirkjubæjarklaustur in the minutest of details. Though her days of fighting on the battlefield were finished, there was value in being the only living person to face alien forces in combat. The "organization" recognized this. And so they made her an offer.

A different kind of war required a different kind of warrior. The downed alien spacecraft had been assaulted by the best forces the Soviet Union and United States could offer, yet none of the original strike team

had survived. Combat like this required a certain type of soldier with a certain type of training. And so that became her role. Observe. Make judgments. Then bring in. By the time the 1960s came around, the covert organization—codenamed *Xeno*—was fully operational. Nina had an eye for talent. Only fitting for a sniper.

And so she recruited, trained, then recruited some more. And all the while, she waited for the one recruit she wanted. The one she hoped she'd have a reason to cross paths with. A recruit who was dear to her heart without even realizing it. Twenty years after Mikhail secured her in the escape pod and saved her life, Nina got her wish.

Sunday, May 27th, 1971
1135 hours
Ivanovo, Russia

IT WAS BARELY a drizzle. Not even enough to darken the strands of her hair, despite the fact that she'd been standing under it for almost ten minutes. It was the kind of day she hated, overcast and dreary, yet in a terrible way, appropriate. Droplets clinging to the split ends that rested atop her shoulders, she closed her eyes and bowed her head. Through parted lips and a cloud of frost, she whispered.

“God our Father, Your power brings us to birth, Your providence guides our lives, and by Your command we return to dust. Those who die still live in Your presence, their lives change but do not end.” Every week, she came to that same place and recited that same prayer. Words of hope for a body there only in memoriam. “May they rejoice in Your kingdom, where all our tears are wiped away. Unite us together again in one family, to sing Your praises forever and ever. Amen.”

The headstone bore only a name and two dates. *Mikhail Alexander Kirov. Born March 2nd, 1925. Died April 23rd, 1958.* That day was one of the few she remembered about him. It was a day without a true goodbye. A day when love was stolen from the grip of a little girl who didn't know enough to know that anything was wrong. Unusual, yes. But not wrong. It was a day with sunshine and puffy clouds, birds singing in the garden, and fresh food in the kitchen. The kind of day little girls are supposed to live for. Wiping away raindrops and saline, she sucked in through her nostrils and whispered, “Four apples, papa.”

Of all life's questions, of all its relentless assailments of doubts and *what ifs*, that was the one answer she knew. Not a day went by when it didn't flit through her mind. Love, expectation, justice...throughout her life, each had been uncertain territory riddled with tripwires and falsities. She was yet to figure any of them out. But she knew there were four apples.

Exhaling, the hazel-eyed brunette took a single step back. Goodbyes

always felt rushed, so she never said them. Straightening her outfit, she turned for the sidewalk.

“Captain Kirova.”

The voice came unexpectedly from off to her right; Kseniya turned quickly to identify it. Further down the sidewalk, under the shelter of an attached umbrella, was a woman in a wheelchair. A double-amputee.

“They say rain falls alike on the just and unjust,” said the woman, who appeared at least to be in her fifties, judging by the short gray hair tucked under her unidentifiable, yet official-looking hat. Her insignia-less uniform was equally ambiguous. “What do you think of that saying?”

For several long seconds, Kseniya just stared. Only after it became apparent that the woman was waiting for a response did she finally manage, “Do I know you?”

The woman shook her head. “No. But I know all about you. I’ve known about you since you were six years old.”

That garnered a reaction. Blinking and canting her head, Kseniya’s body visibly tensed. The woman wheeled closer.

“Is that the grave of your father?”

Hesitantly, Kseniya answered, “Yes.”

“How did he die?”

“Who are you?”

Beneath softening eyes, the woman set her jaw. Silence came again, the only sound around them the pattering of raindrops as they struck the umbrella, the drizzle increasing to a moderately light shower. Finally, the woman answered. “My name is Nina Andrianova. I was the last person to see your father alive.”

The bluntness of the statement hit Kseniya unexpectedly. Jolting backward ever so slightly, she cocked her head and stared.

“I know why you joined the military, Kseniya. I know what drove you to excel. I also know you think Americans killed your father. But they did not. Your father was working with Americans on the day that he died.” As Kseniya remained silent, Nina continued. “I have waited nineteen years to tell you this. That in Mikhail’s final hour, he was thinking of you.”

Emotions in check, Kseniya took a step toward Nina. “I have never seen you before in my life. How do I know anything you are telling me is true?”

Several seconds passed before Nina expressed a reaction. It was a simple one. Hands moving atop the wheels of her wheelchair, she slowly rolled herself backward. “Because I can show you proof. Proof that I *want* to show you, on behalf of an organization that could use you. One

you have earned the right to know about. But if you want to know it, you must follow me now.” Turning halfway around, she surveyed the ever-increasing shower. “The men the rain fell on that day were all just. Soviets and Americans alike.” She glanced at Kseniya. “So are you.”

Without any more words, she turned to roll away.

For the whole while she watched Nina grow distant down the sidewalk, Kseniya never moved. Gone was the drizzle that had gently graced the cemetery, its delicateness replaced by the heavy bombardment of water drops. A storm was on the verge. It’d been like that in Iceland on the day her father had died. Or at least, that was as much as she’d ever heard. No one had bothered to tell her anything else. Until now.

Through dripping lashes and watered-down bangs, Kseniya regarded her father’s grave one more time. A grave without a body, for a man of whom she had too few memories. A man whose footsteps she’d been following blindly for twenty years. The prospect of seeing for the first time was too much to refuse. If there was a truth to be found, if there was a legacy to be known about Mikhail Kirov beyond the hatred for Americans his death had bequeathed her, she wanted to know. She deserved to know. And he deserved to be known.

When Kseniya finally walked away to pursue Nina, she left behind a lifetime of uncertainties. A lifetime of no goodbyes, and twenty years of guilt for not being able to answer a simple question—the last question—her father had asked her.

She never looked back.

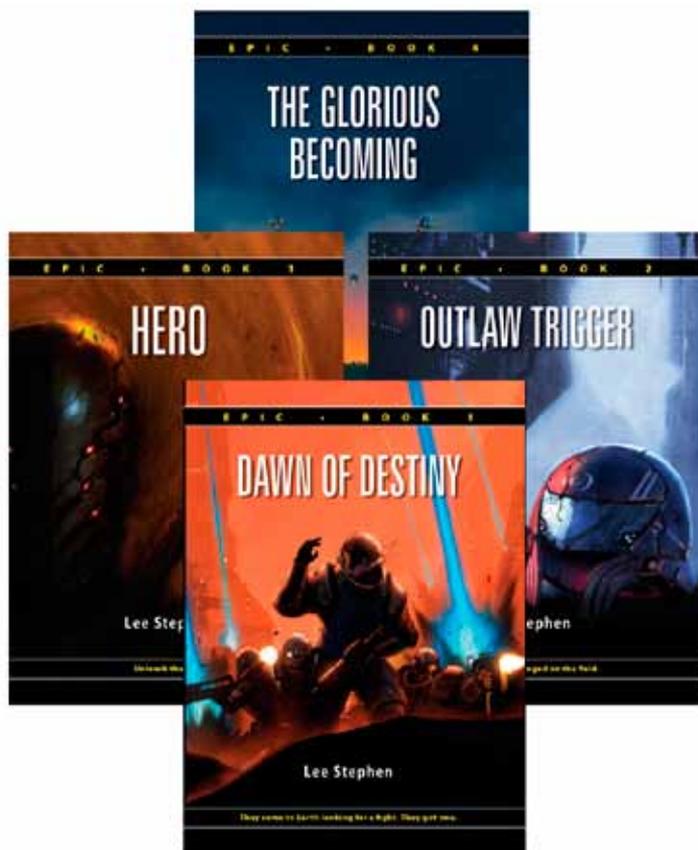
A promotional poster for the game Xenonauts. The background is a dark space scene. In the upper right, a satellite with a central cylindrical body and two large rectangular solar panel arrays is shown. In the lower half, the curved horizon of a planet is visible, showing a blue and white atmosphere. In the upper left, a bright yellow sun or star is partially obscured by a ring of small, dark, bird-like objects. The title 'XENONAUTS' is written in large, bold, white, sans-serif capital letters. Below it, the subtitle 'STRATEGIC PLANETARY DEFENCE SIMULATOR' is written in smaller, white, sans-serif capital letters.

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